

The Dongria Khond tribe

Excerpts taken from an interview with an Industrialist from Odisha

The central part of Odisha has been predominantly occupied by the tribal people who are staying in the mountain area where you see the growth rate is low because of the low education level, low awareness and other facilities and also because of inaccessibility.

What do those tribal communities depend upon?

The tribal communities depend mainly on the forest and forest products. They do not have preservation facilities and are incapable of storing and selling at a



later date. They use the products seasonally for their own sustenance. Maybe they'll make some jam out of that or sun dry it. It is not the scientific way but the whole traditional way of living.

My understanding is that these isolated communities depend on the forest for sustenance and also for medicinal purposes.

These isolated communities depend on the forest for medical purposes. Well sort of. In the highland areas, the tribal areas, they mostly believe in black magic. They are hardly exposed to medicine. Yes, they do have certain exposure to medicinal plants and others, but they are more dependent on sacrificial activity. If there is a fever, if there is a major disease they feel that probably local god and goddess is not happy so they go for a lot of animal sacrifices. These people are illiterate and uneducated.

I understand that there is a great change taking place and an Act of Parliament is going through which will make a change to land rights.

Land acquisition rights existed in India from British times. Now the intention is to make an amendment but it has not been passed; not yet cleared. There have been some minor amendments so far. Basically, for purposes of public utility requirements the government can acquire land. If the plan is to industrialise, for example, then it can be argued that this will benefit community and society.

Today the sociologist, the opinion creator, has decided that even if the government has got a right to take over land from the farmers, they must consider that this is a matter of their sustenance. It may be a very small quantity of land but they own the land, own the cattle. There is also an emotional attachment and not merely financial. The land is of immense value because it is inherited and has been inherited over generations. So public opinion is that the government has rights but the concerns of the people have got to be taken first. If the people concerned don't want industry please do not disturb them. That is a new idea that has yet to be implemented.

Could you explain some of the advantages and disadvantages of development for these isolated communities?

From what I have seen, unfortunately people have been enticed to sell their land because of plans to set up mining in the district. Let's say he sells 2,000 hectares of land at the existing government fixed price of \$10,000 per hectare. He feels great, he has got 100 per cent; very fair. But later when industry comes the price immediately jumps to \$1 million, or say \$50,000. So with the profit he made before of 100% he cannot afford to buy land nearby; not even a small plot. So he gets marginalised. Then what happened in

the process is that even though the land he owned was small, whatever the produce was there, the entire family was dependent on it. They shared the farming, were all involved in the cultivation - whether it is the growing of the padis (rice) the cutting of berries, or any type of food production but the value of the money has fallen and he becomes the biggest loser in the long run. Only nine or ten percent of the local population are employed by industry. There is always the argument that the local people are not educated, not skilled. They were paid a fair price when they sold so there is no further obligation towards them. So the local people are then going into violent activities. This is their only weapon. Before the land was sold there may have been five members of a family dependent on it. But only one member of the family got the money for it. Or only one member of the family was employed by industry. The other four are owed nothing and become total losers. Landless and unemployed.

Second, this brings a disruption in the family set-up. The social set-up, the social fabric which was created on compassion, on joint activities (enterprise), and sharing is totally disturbed. It is one of the most unfortunate parts of this land acquisition.

I am saying this only in respect to the people who were willing to sell their land. But yes, there is a positive side to industrialisation. There is economic development and the community starts getting benefit. People from various states, various places, will come. Learning becomes better. You start understanding the country better. A lot of new activities come about. Health care is introduced; service sectors grow.



Locals using water from the local river to bathe



Naxalites in Odisha