

Traditional Economy of Kondh Adivasi Community of Rayagada, Odisha

“Try throwing a currency note at the hen – it won’t even peck at it. Of what use is such money? One whiff of wind can take away all the (currency) notes, but if you take away our forest, we will not be able to survive”, said Landi Sikoka dramatically, gesturing at a hen happily running around the village. The other women with her like Tulasa Kurungalika, Bolo Sikoka and Tinmoli Kurungalika along with Sukumati Sukoka, who is the Bejuni of the village, nodded their heads vigorously in strong agreement. We went to Khalpadar village in Kumudabali panchayat near Muniguda, Rayagada district of Odisha to understand the economy of Kondh communities here better.



Landi Sikoka (foreground)
with Sukumati Sikoka

Kondhas are a tribal community in the southern region of Odisha (amongst other places). They were a hunter-gatherer community, now divided into those who choose to live on the foothills and the ones who are hill-dwelling (Dongrias). Kui is their mother tongue. Shifting cultivation on the hills, forest-gathering and hunting, cultivation of lowlands and even migration out of the villages for work are all part of the Kondh lives. This piece draws on the lives of both the hill-dwelling Kondhs and the ones in the plains.

In Khalpadar, a question around de-monetisation evoked much laughter from the women. “How does that affect us? We don’t have such notes with us and it does not matter what the sarkaar does with such notes”, they said, bursting into giggles.

Over the next two hours, we discovered how life is still predominantly non-monetised in the Kondh communities here. What is remarkable is not just about the non-monetary systems by which the “economy” – production of goods and services and exchange or trading of the same, property arrangements, ‘financial systems’ etc. – is organised and run, but the communitarian and nature-centric ethos that underpins the economy of the Kondhs. Admittedly, things are changing rapidly, and youth who participated in the discussion kept talking about the need for greater cash incomes, mainly in the context of health emergencies and fares for transportation. It is also true that the Kondhs up in the hills continue to have a fairly independent economy of their own, except for a few needs like salt and dry fish for which they depend on the local haats and towns. In mixed villages where Kondhs live along with other communities, in the plains, the economy is different.

Jagannath Majhi, 32 years, shared with us how he has seen the Kondh economy change in some respects but remain unchanged in several others. “There was no currency that we used in our childhood, though there are greater money flows now in our hands too. It was mainly produce from the hill-farming that would be given away for various services provided by fellow Kondhs. For instance, cowherd services would be rendered by a few persons (it could be men or women, young or old, and mixed) for the entire ‘*kutumb*’ (a ‘family’ of all the members of a village or habitation), where they would take animals of all households grazing (it could be cows, even buffaloes, sheep and goats) and in return, would be paid an apportionment of the agricultural harvests”, he explained. The local measures continue to be used for this – gidda (25 kgs), adda (1 kg), mano (4 kg) and podi (0.5 kg). Cowherds could also be given cooked food and clothes, in return for their services, he explained.

Jagannath feels that it is the Panchayat Raj system which brought in money, along with telugu money lenders. Electricity and television disrupted several societal systems and norms, including economic, he feels.

It is apparent from our interactions that there is nothing that is generalizable about the Kondh economy as of today. It is different for different villages, depending mainly on distance from an urban centre, it appears, as well as whether it is a largely mixed-community habitation in the plains or predominantly-Kondh habitation in the hills. However, what can be talked about is an economy as it existed, and an economy that is fast eroding.

Changes in dongar cultivation with the entry of market-dependent horticulture/monoculture of some tree plantations have brought in significant changes in the economy. Dongar cultivation is shifting cultivation (also called *podu*) on the hillside, with patches of forest land cleared through burning (but with an ability to control the fire to a limited area in the earlier days, with fruit trees and some specific species protected from the felling and burning, and also with long fallows for regeneration of the land after the plot is used for agriculture). On these plots of lands, implements run by the hand are used, for multiple millets-based crops that cover millets, oilseeds and pulses needed for subsistence of the household.

In fact, changes in cultivation patterns and practices here have also brought about changes in the communal aspects of the Kondh lives, related to rituals around cultivation (seed festivals like Bihanu Parabⁱ or harvest festival like Kandulo Parab etc.).

PROPERTY OWNERSHIP:

In the past, when (hill) Kondhs had to establish a settlement in the forest, they would look for signs that indicate that their Goddess Dharni Penu wanted them to settle down somewhere – in the way rocks were arranged, or later, in the outcome after a puja performed to test out a location. However, there appears to be a belief that the forests and mountains in Rayagada where the Kondh settlements exist, belong to the King of Jeypore. Anthropological accounts show that a solid ball of earth, placed in the headman's house, is the mark of the King's right over the habitation land.



When it comes to houses, land and livestock, the Kondhs didn't have a rigid sense of private property. The habitation site is finalised in a manner that houses can be added. These houses are row houses, and in a sense, reduce the use of additional building material. It is assumed that such housing was also a requisite in a hostile setting with tigers and other wild animals. Each house has space kept for livestock.

When a newly married couple want to set up a house of their own, the entire village would help them in building their house, without expecting any wages. It will be an addition to the existing row of houses and if a village grows large, may be another street is added with similar features.

It is only in the recent past that individual house pattas and newer kinds of housing are coming into the Kondh lives, mainly due to government housing schemes.

When it comes to land ownership, the Kondhs in the plains who have lowlands, would have land titles that are usually outdated and not updated (sometimes even 2-3 generations old). Land ownership for women is not part of the customary laws. However, when a woman returns back to her maternal village for some reason or the other, the community will certainly allot a plot of land to her for her to enjoy usufruct rights over it.

However, the Dongar lands have a different arrangement. For the shifting cultivation on the hillside, the entire community / “*Kutumb*” sits down and decides on which plot to be allotted to who, and ultimately, the size of the operational holding taken by any particular household depends completely on their ability to manage a particular size of land, or even the multiple plots they can manage.

After Forest Rights Act 2006 started to get implemented, individual land titles are being allotted, but in far lower extent and holdings than claimed for, and not as Community Forest Rights.

Nearly all Kondh families rear some animal or the other – cows, buffaloes, hens, goats or sheep. It is interesting to note that the animals are mainly used for farming operations (ploughing, mainly, where even cows are used) or for ritualistic purposes (feasts after a puja, or for sacrifice for a puja) – however, there is no culture of milking animals and drinking the milk or selling the milk for income.

The bottomline with regard to property in the Kondh community was: property of some kind can belong to an individual, but it can be used by anyone! This applies to jewellery or even a new shirt or sari. This applies to winnows, ploughs or even a pair of bullocks, and there is no fee to be paid for such use. There is no great worry about class inequities due to unequal property ownership, since operations on larger plots of land depend on capabilities of a household, but the produce is ultimately treated as one that belongs to the entire community and not just one household!

PRODUCTION AND TRADING OF GOODS AND SERVICES

Till the recent past - when rapid changes in the Kondh villages like entry of electricity, access roads, mobile phones and cable television have begun changing the needs and lifestyle of the community members - the economy was centred mainly around food production and consumption, along with activities that catered to socio-cultural beliefs and practices.

Self-reliance is the major principle adopted within farming, along with cooperative labour groups for some tasks. Family’s own labour is relied upon predominantly. In the *dongar* cultivation, even weeding is not taken up very often. It is mainly centred around loosening the soil by hand implements, sowing mixed crops and harvesting. Where more labour is required, exchange labour system is adopted where families help out each other without any cash or wage payment being involved.



Weekly Haat in Jagdalpur, near Muniguda

Services like the carpenter’s and blacksmith’s are important –the payment until the recent past consisted of payment in kind, of grains and sometimes even an animal.

The Kondhs didn't have a culture of weaving – the cloth worn by them used to be called *nachi* (kui term), made from *jalga* tree bark. Even this was not the occupation of any one sub-caste or clan, but each family would create their own. From that stage, the community moved directly into buying garments from the outside world, including saris that come from TN's textile pockets into the weekly haats that dot the Kondh region!

About livestock-rearing, as mentioned already, 5-6 young boys and girls could be assigned to a herd and they would be paid in kind for managing the livestock of all households. There is no milking culture. Animals are killed for sacrifices/feasts, or sold for any cash needs.

Potters either exist within the Kondhs, or pottery ware is purchased from potters in other villages or in haats. There might be one potter per village, a settler usually, if at all. They also used to be paid in kind.

The other services on offer are those of the *Disari* or healer/astrologer, the *Bejuni* or priestess and the *Bareek* or the messenger, who would usually be a dalit from the Domb community.

The former two are important to this day, and Kondhs pay them in kind for their services. While the *Disari* and *Bejuni* services are not hereditary, the services of the *Bareek/Domb* are hereditary.

Overall, it is seen that Kondhs, especially the Dongrias spurn wage-earning, as they feel it denigrates the self-esteem of a self-sufficient community such as theirsⁱⁱ.

There are of course households that have had to migrate out in search of employment and higher wages, but they also undertake seasonal migration, usually to pay off debts that have built up (often linked to being cheated after taking an advance against the pledging of a crop harvest with an external trader) and come back during the farming season.

SOCIAL RELATIONS IN RELATION TO THE ECONOMY

DALITS: The social relation of the Kondhs with the co-dwelling Dombas or dalits is very interesting. In almost all Kondh villages, there will be a few Domb households, and sometimes, they can even be equal in numbers. These dalits have been co-settling with the Kondhs since long. It is said that while they began as petty traders who brought to Kondh settlements valuable commodities like tobacco, salt, dry fish and match boxes, they ended up in several habitations as messengers for revenue and forest departments and other government departments. They were also messengers deployed to go to other villages by the Saonta or head of the Kutumb or other households, to their kind with regard to marriage, death, birth related messages etc.. They would provide these services in exchange for agricultural and forest products given by the Kondhs.

It is seen that the Kondhs practise untouchability towards the Dombs, and do not allow them into their homes, or eat along with them. On the other hand, the Dombs are known to be resourceful, worldly-wise (legal, official and market matters) and it is often reported that they hold more land titles than the (Dongria) Kondhs who actually cultivate the lands. They are also known to have traded the produce gathered from the forest by the Kondhs in a better fashion (by paying very small amounts to the Kondhs, but by further selling it at much higher margins), becoming more prosperous than the Kondhs.

WOMEN: Women have greater autonomy here than in other communities and this could be correlated to dependence on commons that are not owned by men as private property, and the mobility that women have, to go and sell/barter what they have produced or gathered, in the local haats. It is seen that women are the ones who are mainly trading at the haats and interacting with others in the weekly markets, and either bartering their materials for other materials that they need, or doing cash transactions.

Young girls are independent to choose their partners in life, except in the case of socially acceptable practice of kidnapping a girl for marriage. The greater autonomy of women can be linked to their access to nature's common resources, in addition to the social norms that clearly accord greater social status to women, in the household as well as in the community.



Secondly, there is a bride price paid to the girl's family and there is no dowry system that exists with the Kondhs, though things are changing on this front too. The girl is not therefore considered an economic burden in the Kondh community, and the sex ratio is favourable to girls.



VILLAGE FUND AND GRAIN BANK: There are various kinds of village funds that exist for emergencies. These may not always be in the form of orderly and equal donations collected from all households, but even ad-hoc pooling of whatever is available as and when an emergency arises. The village of the groom gives to the village of the bride various gifts, mainly in kind – grains, hens, cows etc. These are kept as village fund too. Sometimes, it is a certain set of trees, cut on a rotational basis if required, that are used for emergencies.

Several Kondh villages have the tradition of grain banks, where every family has to give *kalki*, their share of grain after harvest. In the [Bihanu Parab](#), seeds saved by all households are brought out and placed in the centre of the village, as open source material for anyone to use. No seed is distributed or sown before the festival, however.

FOREST AS THE MOTHER: Even though forest degradation has been rapid in the region, most Kondhs swear by the forest as their mother, and declare that they cannot survive without the forest. There is a respectful, symbiotic relationship that the Kondhs have with the forest. This is a relationship that is not just economic, but is part of the culture and ethos of the community. It is a deep understanding of the inter-connectedness of various things in their eco-system that the Kondhs have imbibed. It is indeed true that the forest provides numerous products free to the Kondhs for their survival – fruits, berries, mushrooms, tubers, leaves and greens, fuel wood, grazing for animals, thatch, bamboo, poles and such building material (in addition to crop residues) etc. [Uncultivated foods](#) are a significant part of the diets of the Kondhs. Forest produce is also gathered for trading in exchange of other materials or for cash. Fishing is done in forest streams in addition to hunting through snares and traps. Honey is collected from hives and consumed as well as sold.

CHANGING ETHOS:

COMMUNITARIAN ETHOS: The principle of saving up and acquiring private property as security for the future or old age is not required in the Kondh community. Life is about every day survival, in any case. Life is also built around the knowledge and security that others in the *Kutumb* will certainly take care of a fellow community person in bad days and in times of need. Food and drink will be shared, whether the quantity is meagre or large. When women go to the forest to gather fruits and bring them back, all children in the village have access to the same, and not just the children of a particular household from where the mother brought back forest fruits, for example. “A child in a house is the child of the entire community”, is the philosophy put into action.

Kondhs are generous with their sharing attitude not just with fellow Kondhs but with outsiders too. Houses are given as also land for cultivation, for settlers in the village. Visitors are welcomed and treated with warmth and hospitality, and verandahs are cordoned and given to them for staying.

A Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel in Odia called *Amrutara Santana* (“The Dynasty of the Immortals”) by famous writer Gopinath Mohanty, which centres around the travails and joys and the worldviews of the Kondh community, depicts scenes where even paying bribes to difficult government officials from revenue and forest departments is undertaken as a joint effort by the members of a village, for instance!

“The world of the Kondhs mainly runs on “*sundi*”/trust and “*mitho*”/friendship and that certainly applies to our economy too”, explained Jagannath Majhi. “I will think about tomorrow later”, is the other attitude that an adivasi carries”, he said. For any emergency in the community, one pools whatever resources exist, for a community member to tide over the crisis.

Gopinath Mohanty describes poignantly, and this is also seen in reality amongst the Kondhs, that while there appear to be no material needs for the Kondhs to borrow from moneylenders like *Komtis* from Andhra, the collective exploitation of officials from the forest and revenue departments citing some violation or the other of some rule/law or the other, in addition to the advances paid by *Komtis* against crop to be harvested would essentially leave the Kondh with produce that would not be enough to stay afloat through the year. Lack of literacy meant signing on legal papers, the implications of which were not known to the Kondhs, but which became weapons in the hands of outsiders.

While the Kondhs interviewed as part of this paper-writing had no bank loans that they had borrowed, some had borrowed loans from private moneylenders. It was apparent that new kinds of lures were being laid in the form of Andhra people coming and offering high lease rents for land on which they want to grow cotton or eucalyptus; SHGs are being formed for thrift as well as credit; schooling of children, not just to residential schools but private schools which need to be paid ill-afforded fees is a new reality. NGOs coming in, and giving freebies as well as loans, including to those who have not been indebted to anyone so far is a new threat. Plantations of monocultures like eucalyptus and cashew, - that too in the name of curbing unsustainable cultivation practices (of podu) or improvement of livelihoods - are affecting the ecology, economy and culture of the Kondhs today.

SPEND WHEN YOU HAVE: In the Kondhs, a family which has had a birth, or a death or a wedding can give its feast to the community only at a time when they have some income/resources in their hands. For instance, after a death, cremation might be performed immediately, but the actual ritualistic funeral service/puja, accompanied by a feast might happen even one year later, after a good harvest in farming, for example.



Jagannath Majhi

Jagannath Majhi gives the example of Balram Majhi in his village who gave his wedding feast after the birth of a son and daughter, only when he felt economically comfortable doing so! There is no pressure on the individual or household to borrow and spend on such social rituals and rites of passage.

In fact, whenever there is such a feast, or festivals related to farming, the entire community contributes in some form or the other – it could be grains, it could be mahua wine, or some forest produce. Every household brings whatever it has, and therefore, a feast does not become the financial burden of one household.

“We try not to buy products from outside, which need us to spend cash. However, clothes, transportation and ticket costs when children are to be visited in residential schools, salt, dry fish, tobacco, medicines and hospitals etc., are what we need cash for”, the women of Khalpadar explained. These days, people have taken to borrowing for purchase of cycles, TV, “godrej” (almirah), beds etc., they said.

“It is true that new inequities are creeping into our society from new age possessions like bikes and TVs, and the elders are worried and angry about these changes, since it is not just about economy but about our ethos”, explained Jagannath. “We used to have norms of social regulation that kept even greedy and erring individuals controlled earlier. The biggest, deterrent punishment would be social boycott and suspension from the *samaaj*. There would be no relationship maintained for a week or so with a household, no talking, no sharing of materials or services etc., once the Kutumb or Samaj adjudicates in this manner. However, even this system is rapidly eroding”, he said.

“In the Kondhs, dependency on each other continues to be high. In fact, it is not even dependency. It is a sense of togetherness”, he felt.

All in all, that is what the Kondh economy is ultimately about: togetherness, fulfilment of basic needs and social regulation around greed, sharing and cooperation, collective responsibilities, autonomy that stems from close dependence on Nature and not asymmetrical markets, self-reliance as a value, and joint decision-making in the community.



Mixed cropping

- ***Kavitha Kuruganti and Ananthoo, ASHA (Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture) put together this article for Vikalp Sangam, with the help of Debeet Sarangi of Living Farms.***

ⁱ Aditi Pinto: “There will be a seed for everyone”, The Hindu, April 23, 2017

ⁱⁱ Mihir K Jena et al (2002): “The Dongaria Economy” chapter of “The Dongaria Kondh: Forest Tribes of Orissa – Lifestyles and Social Conditions of Select Orissan Tribes”, DK Printworld, New Delhi.