

# DHURMARAS: A Crucible of Conflicts



Struggling to gain recognition and access to their rights as a community living at the fringes of the forests and off the forest produce, the villagers of Dhurmaras attempt to make the best out of the situation they are in, hoping the government will address their issues and see them as contributors to society

**C**HAITI, KUPALI AND A FEW other women from Dhurmaras walk some 3 to 4 km in the forest to Kakalgur village to purchase bamboo mats woven by the local weavers. These women collect bamboo culms from the forest close to their homes, make thin slices out of them and dry them in the sun, to use for stitching leaf cups. They sell these things in weekly markets, locally called *haats*. The women are ecstatic about their ability to engage in this trade; they have even taken a bank loan to support their enterprise and have been able to repay their loan installments on time without much difficulty.

During the festive season, in the first quarter of 2016, they started a small shop in their homes, to sell their products. The men of Dhurmaras are engaged in labour work, mostly within the village—repairing roads, doing work with the forest department or working as MGNREGA labourers, along with the women from the hamlet.

Amidst all this came the first rain, marking the start of the agricultural season. It brought the delicious Boda mushroom, sprouting within the dense Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests; a handful of these mushrooms can fetch something in the range of Rs 40 and 80; most of the village women are in the forest collecting these. Within the next few days,

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Dhurmaras is a hamlet in Kotamsar village, Darbha block, Bastar district. It borders the Kanger Valley National Park, separated only by the flowing Kanger stream. With some 40 households in the hamlet and all of them, but one, belonging to the Dhurwa tribe, the hamlet derives its name from the name of the tribe. Dhurmaras is some 5 km from National Highway (NH) 30, connecting Jagdalpur to Hyderabad. However, owing to poor roads, no transport is available to the villagers except on Saturdays, the day of the weekly market in the Neganar village.

On most days, therefore, the women walk to and from the market, a distance of 10 km. Weekly markets in the villages of Tokapal, Darbha and Neganar, where they sell their produce, are another 10 to 15 km beyond their

10 km walk. Once they leave their homes early in the morning to go to the market, they do not return before sunset. Nothing, however, deters these women from going around their usual business.

#### ABOUT THE DHURWA TRIBE

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Dhurwas are one among the several officially recorded tribes inhabiting Bastar in Chhattisgarh. There is lack of clarity over the origin of the Dhurwa tribe. Nandini Sundar, Professor of Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, has conducted several studies on the people from Bastar. In one of her books on the anthropological study of Bastar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar (1854–2006)*, she speculates that Dhurwas (Parjas in the past) were probably a mixture of different tribes, all speaking different languages; they were the original citizens of the Nagvanshi kingdom in Bastar. After losing to the Kakatiyan rulers—the last ruling dynasty of Bastar—they fled to the area they live in currently (Sundar, 2014). A majority of the Dhurwa settlements are in the southeastern part of Bastar district and the adjoining regions of Sukma district, in part

extending to the neighbouring state of Odisha (Grigson, 1991). The Dhurwas speak a Dravidian language, known by the name of the tribe—Dhurwa. It is known, however, by very few and has no written script available. The language is fast disappearing.

Dhurwa settlements are usually either inside or adjacent to a forest area. And this proximity to the forest area, when compared to other tribes of Bastar, makes these forests an integral part of Dhurwa lives, as is evident from the choice of their traditional attire—hand-woven garments made of *raily kosa* silk, an eco-race of silkworm, endemic to Bastar, feeding on the Sal tree leaves in the wild. Their close affinity and association with the forest have made the Dhurwas expert bamboo weavers; they make beautiful bamboo mats, baskets, hats and fish-catching boxes, among other things.

Dhurmaras is no different from any other Dhurwa settlement. The hamlet of Dhurmaras is at least as old as Kotamsar village—its inhabitants recount—and the people have been dependent on forest produce for their livelihood for as long as they can remember. Recently, however, some incidents have occurred that have hampered their livelihoods to

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such an extent that the women are worried about repaying their loans.

Because the area falls inside the Kanger Valley National Park, the forest department is doing everything possible to discourage the commercial harvesting of bamboo shoots from the forest. It conducts regular raids and seizes all the bamboo shoots. Although these raids are being conducted with the sole objective of seizing only bamboo shoots, in an effort to prevent over-exploitation of forests, other bamboo products including bamboo mats are being confiscated as well.

During the monsoon of 2016, on more than a few occasions when the people of Dhurmaras have been caught in possession of bamboo products, all their produce has been seized. Aarawati from Dhurmaras sadly recollects her pain from one such occasion when she and a few other women from their hamlet were asked by the forest guard to get off their transport vehicle, and her bag full of bamboo shoots and bamboo culms worth more than Rs 300—a week of her labour—were taken away. She had to walk to the market site with her headload of paddy because the vehicle too was confiscated.

Women usually set up stalls in the local markets; women also belong to the lowest economic strata—not owning any household assets traditionally. Therefore, anything affecting their small enterprises is certain to push them down further. Chaiti expresses her helplessness saying, “They take our mats in the village, on the roads, at the checking posts, and in the weekly *haats*; we are afraid that we will not be able to repay our bank loans.”

The landholding of all the other hamlets and villages of Kotamsar *gram panchayat* falls under the jurisdiction of either the forest department or the revenue department; ironically, however, Dhurmaras, belongs to neither, and has suffered because of this. People living in Dhurmaras for more than 20 years now are yet to receive titles for their landholdings. A government school bearing the name of Dhurmaras exists in the vicinity but nobody in the hamlet has been able to get a *patta* (title) to the land they cultivate. This has deprived the people of any individual land development work on their lands under MGNREGA, essential to earn a decent living from agriculture in this place.

The process of legitimizing this hamlet’s landholdings has been underway for several years now. After Kotamsar became a revenue *gram panchayat* last year, followed by the visit of the District Collector and the *tahsildar* earlier this year and then the formation of a separate *gram sabha* to accord its approval, carving out a separate revenue village out of the area under Dhurmaras hamlet seems to be on the priority list of the district administration.

Efforts are also on to construct a road connecting Dhurmaras to NH30 under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. Probably, life will become easier once all this is done. Nevertheless, all this should not be an excuse to deprive the poor villagers of their most promising livelihood option in today’s context.

I wonder what I should do with all the knowledge I have about this situation. As a human being and as a development professional, should I side with any one section? Would standing with the women of Dhurmaras be the right choice or should I support the administrative measures being taken to ensure forest conservation? Dhurmaras is not the only hamlet and Kotamsar is

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not the only village going through such an ordeal. As per the Census 2011, there are nine forest villages in Darbha and there are many more villages, dependent on the forest produce for their economic needs, making this compromise.

### **BUILDING A FUTURE**

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Taking sides will not help these villagers get out of their misery; I am hopeful, however, that a concerted effort will help the situation. Or, perhaps, the solution may lie in a different line altogether—working with the people for the promotion of commercial agricultural crops, or the promotion of livestock-rearing as a livelihoods option.

PRADAN has been working in Dhurmaras for close to two years now, having organized the women here into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and introduced

the concept of regular savings and credit among them. PRADAN has tried to work with the village community by addressing their concerns through these livelihood options.

Being close to the forest, the agricultural lands in Dhurmaras have not suffered much soil erosion and, therefore, agriculture is a good livelihood option here. PRADAN has promoted scientific agriculture practices in the hamlet; however, the inaccessibility of this place during the monsoons has not allowed for much success. Again, with the forest nearby, there is enough feed available for livestock-rearing and that could be a livelihood option. PRADAN is now planning to promote livestock-rearing, starting with training the locals on vaccination.

PRADAN has also been working with a Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) in Darbha block since

2014, to help the government improve implementation of MGNREGA. People from the different hamlets of Kotamsar *gram panchayat* prepared hamlet-level plans for the works to be taken up under MGNREGA. Although no individual works could be taken up in Dhurmaras, owing to the lack of official land titles, the local-level planning has increased the villagers' ownership of the process, and gradually its benefits are going to extend to all the hamlets of Kotamsar. There still seems to be a long way to go before any significant difference is made in the lives of these people. Until then, the people of Dhurmaras and many other villages in Darbha are out there in the forest, doing what they know best, and their conflict continues.

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