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# THE NARRATIVE OF DEVELOPMENT: In Search of an Alternative

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Realizing that the world of consumerism and many of the interventions carried out in the name of development will take their people away from traditional practices and habits that have sustained them in good health over centuries, the Kandho tribe takes active steps to resist any outside help that will snuff out age-old, time-tested resources and ways of living and life. In this, they are helped by Living Farms, a civil society organization, in South Odisha.

## The Backdrop

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**A**T 2 A.M. ON 17 JUNE 2018, THE train dropped me in the sleepy town of Muniguda. Harsh, the only person I knew there, was waiting for me. As we started walking towards the vehicle, my exposure to the work

of Living Farms (a civil society organization, CSO, in Odisha) began. Our car reached Bondichuan village of Bisam Cuttack block at around 11 a.m. The villagers (including some from nearby villages) were waiting for us and apparently had begun gathering there since 10 a.m. All of us sat under a large mango tree. The occasional falling of ripe mangoes brought a twinkle to the sad eyes of the older women and mischievous smiles to faces of the young folk.

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The mango tree was at the base of a hillock, where shifting cultivation was being practised. The trees on the hillock had been burnt, as was the practice. Beyond the hillock, lush green mountains were covered by monsoon clouds. From the meeting place, we could see a small cluster of houses in the village. Goats and cows occasionally walked by as we proceeded with the meeting. And amid this unique setting, the story of the alternative unfolded.

### **Kutumb and Kunia**

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The meeting started with introductions, where we were referred to as *kunia* (guests) to their *kutumb* (family). Jagannath Manjhi, the facilitator of the meeting, informed me that, in their Kui language, *kutumb* means family and all the Kandho people, no matter where they live, belong to one family. They are the progeny of nature and protecting nature is their duty. The oldest person of the gathering narrated the importance of staying in villages and the need for a forest around each village. The forest gives them food, shelter, water and medicines. They also said that around 30 per cent of the food on their plate comes from the forest and they substantiated the claim

with a report of a study by Living Farms.

Gradually, with modernization, values and cultural practices had become diluted. Before the villagers could prepare themselves and keep their culture intact, rapid modernization had taken control of their lives. This led the villagers to meet, reflect and critically examine the changes taking place and to initiate alternative actions for a meaningful existence.

The initiative started with realizing that their food diversity was decreasing. Over the course of the last nine years, many transformations had taken place in their food habits. There was, within the *kutumb*, a revolution and a resistance, in non-violent ways, to these external forces. They were able to reinstate the use of their traditional food among the *kutumb*.

In recent years, the *kutumb* has been successful in restoring diverse seeds, important for their unique agro-ecology, and consume healthy food, suitable for their lifestyle. The villagers exchange seeds annually within the *kutumb*, thereby ensuring a steady supply of indigenous seeds, and practice

mixed-cropping as per their age-old tradition and which is scientifically backed as a desired practice of agriculture.

Whereas hybrid and high-yielding seeds are available in neighbouring shops as well as the agriculture department, the villagers stand united in their determination to preserve their traditional seeds and food. This resistance stems from their adherence to their culture. Although they are aware of the lucrative offers of eucalyptus and teak plantations and cotton cultivation, they have decided that no Kandho family will plant these because it would be detrimental to the unique socio-economic systems of the Eastern Ghats.

For this, they have urged government departments not to supply high yielding seeds and chemicals in the villages. They have also requested the forest department to stay away from their forests and not ruin the inherent diversity with a silvi-cultural and commercial plantation mindset. Recently, the villagers have rejected the interventions of many NGOs and government departments when they found that the project is against the beliefs of the *kutumb*.

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This united stance of non-violent resistance and negotiation is a unique tale rekindling the Adivasi life and world.

### Beliefs and Practices

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The villagers consider the forest and the soil to be their mother, which needs careful nurturing. An elder in the meeting asked, "If chemicals are applied to the soil, the food will become poisonous. How can you poison your own mother's milk?"

The villagers listed several practices that demonstrate that their cultural identity stems from living in harmony with nature. As an example: no cultural festival is complete without the home-prepared *irpi kalu* (Mahua beer) because the Earth God can only be satisfied when that is offered. The Mahua flower, fruit and seeds from the jungle are not only essential for celebrations but

also are important ingredients in their food and in the fodder for their livestock. Mahua is a gift of nature and they understand its judicious use.

Every month, the people of the *kutumb* celebrate different festivals. All the adult men and women sit together and discuss pertinent issues. During these meetings, the norms on forest produce collection, cutting of trees, burning of forests, cultivating crops and seed exchange are finalized. No further meetings are required, except in an emergency when they call special meetings.

Unity is their prime power. Living as a *kutumb* facilitates the men, women and youth to sit separately in their respective groups and make action plans, as per the decision of the *kutumb*. These smaller groups often influence the *kutumb* to discuss important issues in their meetings.

### Why and since when

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The villagers clearly support the move to resist all outside interventions that take them away from their traditional and time-tested practices and

engagement with nature; in fact, they are jubilant about the alternative life that they are carving out. In 2009, when some villagers and professionals of Living Farms prepared a crop diversity chart, they realized that the severity of poor food diversity had taken place in the area ever since hybrid, high yielding seeds and the promotion of monoculture were introduced. They started educating the people about dietary diversity and promoted mixed-cropping with traditional varieties. By the time they restored the diversity to some extent with around 2000 families, they confronted another hurdle: the shame the Kandhos felt about their own food despite being aware of its nutritive value.

In their interactions with the higher-caste people, school teachers and shopkeepers, they sensed that they were being constantly mocked about their food practices. The influence of the external world and the market coerced them to adopt foods that were costly and placed strain on their household budgets. In order to be accepted by the larger society, they began to give up their traditional food practices, leading also to severe malnutrition.

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They held meetings and workshops highlighting the nutritional benefits of traditional cultivated and non-cultivated foods and cuisines. Following two years of rigorous investment, the villagers, especially the younger generation, acknowledged the importance of food sovereignty

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In 2012, the elders of the *kutumb* initiated an internal revolution by encouraging the consumption of traditional food and also instilling pride in their heritage. They held meetings and workshops highlighting the nutritional benefits of traditional cultivated and non-cultivated foods and cuisines. Following two years of rigorous investment, the villagers, especially the younger generation (those who were going to school and having mid-day meals), acknowledged the importance of food sovereignty.

Simultaneously, because most of their food and household requirements came from the forest, the women started raising their voice against the strict regulations imposed by the forest department and the atrocities meted out by the forest officials. Their continuous resistance to the department and its policies bore fruit: the villagers restricted the mobility of the forest department in their forests and have applied for Community Forest Rights (CFR) for their village forest. Although CFR is yet to be awarded to them, they have gained better control and access over the forest since 2016.

In recent *kutumb* meetings, the issue of the younger generation

being swayed by modernization and their propensity to migration were important topics for discussion. With the mushrooming of residential schools and different skill-building trainings, the young were unwilling to stay in the village or work in the fields. Along with this, the illusion created by TV and mobile phones attracted the youth to the labour markets in cities. Unfortunately, once there, they get trapped in the lower tiers of the unorganized labour sector.

The youth find it challenging to live frugally. The *kutumb*, therefore, facilitated the formation of many youth groups. These groups engaged with the youth (both boys and girls) to reorient them with the values of the *kutumb*. Currently, the *kutumb* is also making Odiya-to-Kui dictionaries for the younger generation, to learn the local Kui language.

In the last five years, many activists and experts have engaged directly with the villagers through workshops. The impact of these workshops is evident in the people's sharing and actions. With Living Farms, the villagers have documented their learning and also are collaborating in many

research projects, to influence policies to be more pro-nature.

The leaders, who participated in the workshops, facilitate in the decision-making and action plans of the *kutumb*. The leaders have negotiated with some development agencies (NGOs) to modify their projects, as per the decisions of the *kutumb*. For example: they have accepted the safe drinking water project but have influenced an NGO to change their chemical intensive agriculture intervention into sustainable farming. Looking at these benefits, the Kandhos of Gudari block have started relearning mixed-cropping, improving their village governance, and gaining greater access and control over the forest.

### **Women and Decisions**

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Women took centre stage in the protests against forest department. Due to their active participation, the officials of the forest department backed out and the Kandhos are now able to access the forest without any fear. Although time and again, the villagers have emphasized that women play an important role in *kutumb* meetings and in other protests, women remained

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silent throughout the meeting that I attended. Even after some exploration on the nature of women's participation during the discussion and the decision-making processes, there was hardly any response from the women. Professionals of Living Farms later said that the women participated in the protests and worked on the decisions of the *kutumb* actively but they seldom voiced their views in meetings. This would definitely require an internal change on how the women saw themselves in a traditional Kandho society.

### Youth and Alternatives

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The members of the youth group said that their role was to influence youngsters to respect and follow the *kutumb* culture and ethos. They have uprooted the eucalyptus plantation, helped in the promotion of mixed-cropping, revived the celebration of old festivals such as Meria and stopped the celebration of Hindu festivals among tribals in their locality. In the class and caste struggle with the upper castes, Kumuti and Shundhis, the youth play a major role in preparing and sharing communication material.

With the initiation of youth groups in 2016, the focus was on influencing youngsters about the detrimental effects of mobiles and TVs. They realized that the kind of education that they were getting did not equip them for life or the world. On the contrary, it made them dependent on externals for livelihood choices. In many villages, the youth are no longer migrating and have stopped going for skill development trainings as well; they are, instead, staying in the villages and practising agriculture. According to them, skill-building programmes make them cheap labour in big cities and they lose their freedom. Instead, they are now conducting workshops with the village youth, regarding the benefits of imbibing traditional knowledge and skills more efficiently and staying in the village. Some families have also banished TVs from their houses.

### Answers and Silences

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During the whole interaction, the villagers seldom talked about internal conflicts within the *kutumb* and their mechanism to address future threats. There are still significant numbers of Kandho villages that do not

follow this type of *kutumb* culture and have an influence on these resisting villages in many ways. The youth, usually, get attracted to a 'bling' lifestyle. There are many families, who still go for teak and eucalyptus plantations and cotton cultivation, which is against the decision of the *kutumb*. When asked about these, the people said that the *kutumbs* were ill-prepared to address these issues as of now but are vigilant about them.

They attempted to influence the stakeholders to make Pradhanmantri Awasik Yojana (PAY) in the way traditional Kandho houses were made; however, apart from allowing this in some sporadic cases, such changes for all PAY houses was rejected by the block officials. Yet, a majority of government schemes and projects of NGOs are not changing, even after the repetitive insistence of the villagers.

As I started to pen down my learning, I was struck by two aspects. First, I think that the participation of women in *kutumb* meetings and their position as decision-makers in this alternative is very crucial. Currently, the

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journey of the *kutumb* lacks systemic understanding and detailed investment for better involvement of women. Second, some of the youth are taking radical measures; however, will it help them in their quest? Their political intent for an alternative life seems inspired by new social movements; in the Schedule-5 area, however, better amalgamation with the system is perhaps a desired way out. This is important because many investments of the externals are contrary to the ethos of the *kutumb*.

Two major threats loom large over the initiative. The first is the volatile, political nature of the area with Left-wing

extremism and aversion of the state to the tribal movement (these are the mineral-rich blocks near Niyamgiri). The second is individual interest vs. the collective way of life. Among the villagers, some are opting for chemical-intensive agriculture and eucalyptus plantation. Some are not following *kutumb* decisions and continue to work on individual interest. The *kutumb* is yet to figure out how to address these.

The light in these dark times is the constant support of Living Farms. Enhanced awareness of their agro-ecology and an attempt to make sovereign village clusters with solidarity economy are the alternatives we need and the

*kutumbs* are pioneering these. Maybe, together they will find answers.

The villagers insisted I dine with them. The Sun, before going to sleep behind the mountains, lingered for a few more seconds while I relished the local dishes prepared by the villagers. On my way back in the twilight, I wondered, “Am I the same inquirer-explorer that I was in the morning or am I the guest that the villagers greeted a few hours ago or have I transformed in some way to be part of their *kutumb* now?”

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