

# Livelihood Practices and sustenance among Dongria Kondhs of Odisha

Kedarnath Bocha<sup>1</sup> and B.K.Srinivas<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M.Phil. Research Scholar Department of Anthropology, Central University of Odisha, Sunabeda, NAD Post Office, Koraput-763004, Odisha, India, E-mail: [kedarnathbocha@gmail.com](mailto:kedarnathbocha@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Central University of Odisha, Sunabeda, NAD Post Office, Koraput-763004, Odisha, India, E-mail: [bksrinivas@cuo.ac.in](mailto:bksrinivas@cuo.ac.in)

\*Corresponding Author

## Abstract

*The livelihood practices of tribes in India are poor and much more dependent upon forest and agriculture based with no technical skills. All their livelihood related activities are only confined to agriculture based products along with natural forest products. Odisha is famous for its tribal concentration. It gives shelter to 62 varieties of tribal communities located in different parts of the State. Among all the tribes, Kondhs top the list regarding numerical preponderance and one of the main divisions of the Kondhs tribe is the Dongria Kondhs. Dongria Kondhs were recognized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group by government of India and they inhabit exclusively in the Niyamgiri hill ranges of Eastern Ghats. The Dongria Kondh largely relies on shifting cultivation, horticulture, collection of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) along with hunting and gathering for survival. They perform agriculture by indigenous method. The current research paper is empirical in nature based on the field study among Dongria Kondh tribal group of Rayagada district of Odisha state. To collect the primary data from the field schedules were extensively used and the research methods followed for study are interview, surveys, focus group discussion and observation. The present study made an attempt to sketch an outline of the various issues related to livelihood practices among Dongria Kondhs and their perspective towards sustenance.*

**Key Words:** Livelihood, Dongria Kondh, Minor Forest Produce, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, shifting cultivation and indigenous method

## Introduction:

Livelihood is an umbrella term which is defined as the arrangement of one person's living, which includes different capabilities of people along with assets, food, income, shelter as means of basic necessities for one living in society. Along with food and shelter it also encompasses a number of parameters for livelihood setting like clothing, cultural values, social relationships and bonding with others. Hence, livelihood can be best defined as the one's methods and meaning of arrangement for living in this materialistic world. A livelihood is said to be sustainable when a person is able to overcome various natural and socio-economic stresses and find the way of living again by enhancing wellbeing with hopes and aspirations for future. A sustainable livelihood is defined by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP, 2008) as having "the ability to cope and recover from unexpected events, while at the same time enhancing current and future capabilities"

The livelihood practices of tribes in India are poor and much more dependent upon forest and agriculture based with no technical skills. All their livelihood related activities are only confined to agriculture based products along with natural forest products. Despite of different sex, age, young, old status of life, all tribes are occupied with these primary means of living systems. Tribal livelihood is mainly primitive in nature which is more focused upon surrounding natural resources along with minor forest-based products and agriculture. Tribes are the best reservoirs of forest as they know how to use forest for their livelihood. Odisha is famous for its tribal concentration and there are 62 tribal groups inhabiting in different parts of the state. Out of 75 particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) recognized by government of India, Odisha is homeland for 13 PVTGs and Dongria Kondh is one among them (Census, 2011). Niyamgiri hill range which spreads over two districts of south Odisha namely Kalahandi and Rayagada are considered as home to Dongria Kondh tribe. Shifting cultivation (*podu chasa*) is widely practiced by Dongria Kondh where a patch of land is cleared and planted for a period of time after harvesting over the land; it was left unplanted and moved to different land for fresh cultivation. Horticulture is also practiced by them along with shifting

cultivation in small scale. The products which have been yielded by them are sold in their local markets and bazars. Since, they are forest dwellers; they depend upon hunting of forest animals along with collection of minor forest products. Dongria Kondhs spend large share of their money on food, religious affairs and shelter. Their food habits, nutritional intake and cultural aspects are different from other communities of societies. However with their low income strategy they are determined to save their all socio-cultural aspects of life and tried to maintain their livelihood practices hardly.

For the last few decades, the violation of human rights along with violation of livelihood dependency of tribal's on forest got concerned by policy makers and other governmental and non-governmental institutions for better upliftment of status of tribal livelihood. Therefore government has taken much more concern through different plans and policies for the overall development of tribals.

#### **Review of literature:**

The data mining and review process helped researcher to get deep insights about the problem of the study which enabled to carry out the research properly in the right direction. The literature pertaining to livelihood practices of tribals were reviewed for the present paper and summarized systematically based on descending year of publication of research work.

Basavarajaiah DM, Narasimhamurthy B, Bharathi M and Naik J (2020) in their research work on Tribal livelihood status in Western Ghats analyzed the prevailing poverty, hunger and deprivation situation of tribals. Their study reveals that, inspite of many development plans and policies executed for tribals, no eye-catching growth is noticed in their socio-economic status and livelihood patterns among tribals.

Tewari P, Singh R.D, Nagarkoti P and Gumber S (2020) in their research article on Van Raji primitive tribe from Uttarakhand, India, presents the livelihood and land usages patterns. Their study reveals that temporal changes in livelihood practices along with land use pattern had been forced them to acquire alternative livelihood means. Low educational status, poor technical skill, poverty, small land holdings among Van Raji tribe leads to low income and low nutritional status. Study also evidenced that livelihood in tribal areas has been vulnerable to factors like climate change, unemployment and poor infrastructure.

The study by Dash D, Amardeep and Mahra G.S (2018) discuss on generating livelihood for tribal youth through agricultural development. The authors explains that the tribal youth have lot of potential but due to lack of awareness and technical skills they were unable to reap the benefits. Their study also suggests that only education can bring overall change and uplift livelihood among tribal youth.

Venugopal S, Gau R and Appau S (2018) in their research paper on fishing communities discusses about impact of environment on traditional livelihood practices. They reveals that how environmental disruptions threaten the livelihood practices and also explained how subsistence communities adopts livelihoods.

Simon V.S (2016) research article on land laws, livelihood and security of tribes analyzed the land alienation process, laws and policies in tribal regions. The author explains inner relationship among land laws and livelihood patterns and its regularity and security among tribal groups in India. This work also discussed about tribal land regulating issues along with rights over forest and forest products and finally concludes that despite of numerous laws and regulations tribals were facing lots of hurdles to overcome the land alienation problem.

Tatpati M, Kothari A and Mishra R (2016) in their research paper discussed about threat to Dongria Kondh livelihood system in niyamgiri forest range. The paper highlights that the arrival of mining proposal arose threats among inhabitants of niyamgiri range particularly among Dongria Kondh people of that regions.

Prajapati M, Solanki, K.D and Thakkar, K.A (2014) in their research study measured the sustainable livelihood of tribal and non tribal farmers from north Gujarat. They used environment, social and economic indicators to detect sustainable livelihood among tribal and non tribal farmers. It was found from the study that the issues like consumption patterns, cultural events, traditions, health services were different among both groups of farmers. Their

study found out the gap of sustainable livelihood between tribal and nontribal groups. Among tribals 90.1% have low to medium sustainable livelihood patterns where as 87.27% of nontribal groups had medium to high sustainable livelihood patterns.

Research paper of Ramya T (2013) on livelihood patterns of forest tribes a comparative study among three tribal communities namely *nyishi*, *bangru* and *puroik* of Arunachal Pradesh. The findings of the study reveals that the forest and agricultural land is the main source of livelihood for *Nyishi* and *bangru* communities, their economic status and per capita income is good because of good agricultural returns. Whereas, the *puroik* tribe had low living standards than *Nyishi* and *bangru* communities because of their heavy dependency upon forest products.

Gadadhara M (2012) in his research study on Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh and Domb communities of niyamgiri hills discusses hunger and coping strategies. He reveals that the shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering and collection of minor forest produce is the major means of livelihood for these communities. The author also submitted that due to depletion of forest resource and aggressive mining activities in and around their inhabitations, their livelihood base had been shrinking and forced them to rely upon market for purchasing foods to meet their food deficient. Government schemes had hardly any impact on their improvement of livelihood status.

The research study of Singh A and Sadangi B.N (2012) on Livelihood patterns and resource base of tribals in Koraput and Rayagada districts of Odisha had found that farming, forest wage, small business, wage labourer were livelihood patterns of tribals. Further he reveals that poor literacy levels, lack of knowledge on technology and lack of resource base undermine their livelihood systems.

#### **Major Objective:**

For the present paper, keeping in view of the diversified occupation pattern of Dongria Kondhs the major objective of the study was to assess the livelihood practices and its associated issues in relation to social, cultural and economic aspects.

#### **Study area:**

Dongria Kondh predominantly inhabits in Niyamgiri hill range of south Odisha. The Niyamgiri hill range is distributed under two districts of Odisha namely Rayagada and Kalahandi. This forest range is bounded by *Karlapat* wildlife sanctuary on the North-West and *Kotgarh* wildlife sanctuary on the North-East end, which is very rich in biodiversity and natural resources.

#### **Significance:**

Most of the government sponsored schemes and programmes related to livelihoods, do not produce desired results due to lack of knowledge about livelihood practices and natives perspectives. One needs sound understanding over local views on socio-cultural and economic aspects of studied people to get deep insights. The current research work looks Dongria Kondh from very close quarters by considering their socio-cultural and economic life. Hence, the outcome of research may be beneficial to the government for policy frame in livelihood context which would be beneficial for the rural peoples.

#### **Methodology:**

The present research paper is qualitative in nature based on empirical data collected from 135 households of Dongria Kondh. The secondary data pertaining to research was collected from books, journals and e-sources; it was also collected from different government and non-governmental institutions like Block offices, tehsil offices along with Dongria Kondh Development Agency (DKDA) and NGOs. The primary data on livelihood practices among studied people collected directly from field study by executing research tools and methods. Utmost care was taken to formulate elaborate schedule to cover all aspects of livelihood. Initially a primary survey was done on demography to know the population details. Later interview and observation method was extensively used to collect empirical data. Both structured and unstructured face-to-face interviews held to get minute insights about livelihoods of natives and day to day activities, occupational diversity and gender roles in livelihood activities were captured through observation method. Focus group discussions are

also carried out among studied people by dividing small groups consisting members of 10 to 15 in each group, this helped in detecting natives' consciousness towards livelihood practices.

**Sampling:**

Simple random sampling method was applied to pick the sample from the universe of study. The study was conducted in three blocks of Rayagada district of Odisha namely Kalyansinghpur, Muniguda and Bisam Cuttack. Altogether nine villages were selected by taking three villages from each block randomly. In the later stage 15 households from each village were selected and picked the sample size of 135 households for the current research study.

**Results:**

The primary data pertaining to field study on livelihood of Dongria Kondh was collected, compiled and analyzed. Since it is a qualitative study the interpretations were drawn and narrated issue wise livelihood practices and its dynamics.

**Forest based livelihood:**

Tribal livelihood is mainly primitive in nature which is more focused upon surrounding natural resources and heavily depends upon forest. The Dongria Kondh largely relies on hunting, gathering, collection of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) and major forest produce along with horticulture and shifting cultivation for survival.

Dongria Kondh collects and gathers large share of MFP between the months of March to June, which is peak season for harvest. However, some other forest produces also available throughout the year apart from peak season. The various MFP available in the premises of studied people are leaves of Bauhiniavahili (*Siali*), Myrobalan (*harda*), terminalia bellirica (*bada*), gooseberry (*anla*), bamboo (*derka*), bamboo shoot, bamboo mushroom (*derku kutka*) tamarind (*leli*) and tendu leaves (*duriaku*), tendu fruit (*duri*), blackberry (*lekajambu*), dates (*sindi*), custard apple (*sitabogu*), wild mushrooms (*kutka*), castor seeds (*keni*), guava (*jambu*), mango (*manha*), broom stick grass (*hempru*) and Mahua flowers (*irpi*), Indian soapberry (*siling*), herbal roots, honey, leafy vegetables (*patinkuchha*, *gandri kuccha*, *vhardakuchha*), tubers, yam (*hilkuna*) and fuel wood. Season wise availability of MFP were given in the below statement.

**Table I- Season and month wise availability of MFP:**

Season	Month	Type of MFP
Spring (basanta)	Mid February to mid April	Tamarind, castor seeds, <i>siali</i> leaves, broom sticks grass, tendu leaves, tendu fruit, terminalia bellirica
Summer (grisma)	Mid April to mid June	<i>Siali</i> leaves, mahua flowers, tamarind, tendu leaves, tendu fruit, mango, Myrobalan, terminalia bellirica, leafy vegetables, yam, Indian blackberry, date
Monsoon (barsa)	Mid June to mid August	<i>Siali</i> leaves, mahua fruit, leafy vegetables, Myrobalan, wild mushroom, bamboo shoot, bamboo mushroom, yam, Indian blackberry, date
Autumn (sharata)	Mid August to mid October	<i>Siali</i> leaves, custard apple, wild mushrooms, guava
Winter (hemanta)	Mid October to mid December	<i>Siali</i> leaves, castor seed, guava, citrus fruit ( <i>narngi</i> ), orange, fuel wood
Winter (sita)	Mid December to mid February	<i>Siali</i> leaves, tamarind, citrus fruit, orange, fuel wood

Apart from collection of MFPs Dongria Kondh indulge in collection of major forest produce also. The timber wood they collect for multipurpose like construction of houses, preparing agricultural implements, making household artifacts and utensils.

Other major forest produce collected by them are fruit of different varieties like banana, mango, jackfruit, Orange and citrus for consumption as well as for selling

#### **Utility of MFP:**

Collection of MFP is comparable large in number than major forest produce among Dongria Kondh. Both male and female members of communities are involved in the collection of MFP; however women are involved more in this activity. Usually MFP collection is done after completion of farming activities and sometimes they also collect it in between the interval of farm works.

After collection of *Siyali* leaves Dongria Kondh prepare leaf plates and sell in the market which has very good demand in urban centres. Myrobalan (*harada*) and *bahada* are nuts with medicinal value after the fruit ripe they collect the nuts and use it to cure variety of skin diseases. Kendu leaves are popularly known as *beedi* leaf, which is one of the important MFP which generates sizeable economy for them. They collect *beedi* leaves, make bundles, dried it and sell them in the nearby market. They collect bamboo shoots and bamboo mushroom, the surplus produce is sold in the market after consumption. Bamboo is used for making various products like baskets, wattles and for fencing they also sell the bamboo in the nearby market. The different fruits collected by Dongria Kondh for self consumption as well as for sale are mango, jackfruit, banana and citrus.

Hunting is another collective leisure activity of natives whenever they are free from farming activity they hunt animals. Only men take part in hunting operation. They hunt animals like southern red muntjac, barking deers, sambar deers and wild pigs. Hunting activity among them has cultural and religious significance. The meat of the hunted animals is distributed equally among all the members who participated in hunting. Due to the restrictions on wildlife hunting from forest department the hunting activity is a rare and they hunt only small animals.

#### **Land based livelihood practice:**

All the human communities surviving on earth since from old stone age period to current modern period, land is regarded as one of the important aspect of means of living. Land is important asset for Dongria kondh tribes where they practice shifting cultivation (*podu chasa*). Along with shifting cultivation they also involve in horticulture activities.

#### **Shifting cultivation:**

Dongria Kondh traditionally dwells in hilly and forest areas, due to the absence of permanent plain land they adopt shifting cultivation to sustain. They consider forest is their asset and clears the patch of forest land for shifting cultivation depends upon the strength and stamina of family. All the cleared bushes and twigs were burnt and wait for the rain before sowing. Once the monsoon is active they sow all variety of seeds includes pulses, millets, paddy, vegetables, grains by making small furrows with digging stick. The technology used for this type of cultivation is very simple requires only some digging sticks, hand axe, sickle, crowbar and spade. The crops grow naturally and the burnt ashes act as good manure for the growth of crops in the cleared land. They do not use animals, pesticides and inorganic manure in shifting cultivation process. After harvest they leave the cultivated land fallow, abandon it and move to next fresh patch of land for another cycle of shifting cultivation. The shifting cultivation area is shrinking day by day due to the restriction imposed by forest authorities. Since it is one of the important livelihood means which provide considerable food and nutrient supply was under threat due to restriction from forest department and impacts the Dongria Kondh livelihood negatively.

#### **Horticulture:**

Horticulture is referred as garden culture is purely seasonal activity. It is practiced widely among Dongria kondh tribes for their livelihood. The entire hilly forest in and around their territory was distributed amicably by peaceful deliberations among themselves. Now a days government also allotting forest land and providing fruit bearing species for horticulture activities under Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihoods Improvement Programme (OPELIP). The horticulture crops they grown in the forest hills are pineapple, orange, citrus, banana, papaya and mango.



**Issues related to their livelihood practices:****Crop failure:**

Dongria Kondhs mostly relies on shifting cultivation to derive his large part of food and nutritional needs. The success of the shifting cultivation and good harvest returns from it depends on number of factors like inactive monsoon, soil erosion, wild animals attack on crops and climate. Even they get good harvest they do not get good price when they sell their agriculture produce in the market. On top of existing problems the pandemic COVID-19 caused lot of hardship due to area movement restrictions. Hence the shifting cultivation returns are unpredictable.

**Sale of agriculture and forest produce:**

Once upon a time there was huge demand for MFP but due to advancements in technology and modernization new synthetic products and packed foods penetrated into market and lessen the demand of MFP of tribes. Earlier *Siali* leaves along with *kendu* leaves were used as plates or containers in many social gatherings, festivals and religious occasion for serving foods among number of communities were vanished and replaced by paper and plastic plates and cups.

They are not getting minimum supportive price for their MFP at government shops and in the open market they are getting very little price. Forest dwelling communities like Dongria Kondhs livelihood was mainly backed by food collection and gathering face lot of hardships now a days. Sale of turmeric, tamarind, ginger, Myrobalan (*harada*) and *bahada* by tribals in local markets is also decreased due to dependency of people on other substitute products available in big grocery shops and supermarkets.

**Inadequate support and lack of education and technical skills:**

The situation faced by Dongria Kondh people related to their livelihood sustenance is lack of adequate support from any institutions. Despite number of plans and policy formulations, their practical execution in real sense is not seen. Lack of education and technical skills among younger generation further pushed them to corners and makes them more lethargic. They are also not able to work for any industries and offices because of their illiteracy and lack of technical knowledge.

**Loss of livelihood and adoption of diversified livelihood:**

Transformation is inevitable and no community is unaffected from process of modernization, globalization and liberalization, Dongria Kondhs have constantly faced challenges of modernity as well as cultural interference. Their livelihood system was under threat and they are not able to cope up with new challenges and changes in their lives. But they are adopted different livelihood practices which deviates from their own livelihood systems due to some issues related to livelihood like low income, inadequate support from government institutions, little agricultural lands, to meet their daily basic needs, small returns from agriculture and horticulture practices. Diversified livelihood practices have been come with new means of living like they are working as day laborers, wage laborers and rearing cattle.

**Conclusion:**

Tribal livelihood is mainly primitive in nature which is more focused upon surrounding natural resources and heavily depends upon forest. The Dongria Kondh largely relies on shifting cultivation, horticulture, collection of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) along with hunting and gathering for survival. The study of livelihood practices and sustenance is a brief account of the Dongria Kondhs age-old practices pertaining to eco-friendly forest-based livelihood strategies. Shifting cultivation is associated with beliefs, perception and rationality in land use among Dongria Kondh. Dongria Kondh traditionally dwells in hilly and forest areas, due to the absence of permanent plain land they adopt shifting cultivation to sustain. They consider forest is their asset and clears the patch of forest land for shifting cultivation. Dongria Kondh collects and gathers large share of MFP between the months of March to June, which is peak season for harvest. However, they also collect some MFP excluding peak season. Apart from collection of MFPs Dongria Kondh indulge in collection of major forest produce also. The timber wood they collect for is utilized for construction of houses, preparing agricultural implements, making household artifacts and utensils. Horticulture is referred as garden culture

is purely seasonal activity. It is practiced widely among Dongria Kondh tribes for their livelihood. The entire hilly forest in and around their territory was distributed amicably by peaceful deliberations among themselves. Now a days government also allotting forest land and providing fruit bearing species for horticulture activities under Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihoods Improvement Programme (OPELIP). The horticulture crops they grown in the forest hills are pineapple, orange, citrus, banana, papaya and mango.

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The issues which challenge the livelihood practices of Dongria Kondh are inadequate support from government, lack of education and technical skills, crop failure due to low rainfall, low agricultural harvest, soil erosion, lack of irrigation facilities and no supportive price for MFP. All these factors have pushed them to adopt and acquire different livelihood practices to meet their basic needs.

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