

## **KANDHA WOMEN OF ODISHA: MAPPING SOCIAL WORLD AND THEIR ASSOCIATION WITH FOREST**

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### **Introduction**

Odisha is a state located in the eastern part of the Indian sub-continent with a substantial portion of its land being located in the coastal region of Bay of Bengal. This eastern Indian state is also known for its dense forest cover and a diverse wildlife. Consisting of the thick forest area makes this state rich in forest-based resources as a result of which the state has seen the settlement and development of various tribal communities in different forested region within it. Amongst many such tribal communities, the Kandha tribe is an indigenous community that has been residing in the forest areas of Odisha for hundreds of years.

Like many forest-dwelling communities, the Kandha tribe too has developed a deep connection with the forests for they have been feeding them through their resources for ages. They see their relationship with the forests as 'holy' for they have been taking care of all their physical needs like that of providing food, clothing and shelter and protecting them from all hardships of the life. Even as some of the male members of the community gradually started moving out of the forest for some alternate ways of finding livelihood sources - mostly lured by the communities residing in the outside world in the vicinity of these forest-dwelling tribes, the women of the Kandha communities continued their dependency on the forest resources to fulfil the everyday household needs of the family. Their dependency on the forests were based on their needs to obtain resources like water (from the forest springs), natural food items in the forms of leaves, roots, fruits, vegetables etc. and also woods required for firing chulhas in their households to cook food for their family and feed them.

As a result of this, the women of the Kandha tribal communities developed a stronger relationship with the forests compared to the men of their communities. However, in last few years, things have been changing drastically. As one looks deeply into the changing lives and lifestyles of these communities, one can easily find that there has been a growing distance between Kandha women and the forest due to numerous challenges implicated by the modern societies. This paper aims to explore these challenges and implications in

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detail through an extensive review of related available literature put together by various scholars from multi-disciplinary perspectives particularly from the social science fields.

### **Methodology**

This paper seeks to underline the recent developments in the state of Odisha that has resulted increasing distance between the women of the Kandha communities and the forests. Methodologically, this paper draws from the review of existing literature in the forms of books and journals and building on the data and insights gathered from them in qualitative forms, offers suggestions as to what could be done to improve the situations of the Kandha tribe in general and the women of this community in particular in the Indian state of Odisha.

### **Kandha Tribe: A Background**

The Kandha tribe in the state of Odisha is one of the largest and most prominent tribal communities in the state. According to the Census of 2011, the total tribal population in the state of Odisha is around 23 per cent. The population of Kandha tribe is presently estimated to be around 1.5 million in the state constituting around 17 per cent of the total tribal population in Odisha (Ota et. al., 2013). The major concentration of these communities can be seen in the districts such as Kandhamal, Rayagada, and Gajapati, which are known for their dense forests and hilly terrain. The Kandha communities have a rich cultural heritage and a closer relationship with the forests, which have been a major source of livelihood for them for generations. Over the ages, despite fulfilling their basic needs from the forests like - food, water, and other resources, they have also developed a deep understanding of the forest-based ecosystems and the wildlife that inhabit them.

However, in recent years, there has been a growing distance between Kandha women and the forest due to various challenges and implications. This distance has been particularly significant for Kandha women, who have traditionally developed a close association with the forests and have played a critical role in sustaining forest-based livelihoods. For instance, the women in the Kandha communities have been culturally entrusted with the responsibilities for collecting non-timber forest products (NTFPs), such as honey, mushrooms, medicinal plants etc. which have been one of the chief sources of income for their families.

Between 1935 and 2010, Odisha experienced a massive decline in the forest cover which is estimated to be around 40 per cent (Reddy, Jha, & Dadhwal, 2013). A study by Singh et al. (2010) reveals that mining and other industrial activities in the state of Odisha has resulted in significant decline in the forest cover along with decreasing agricultural land area affecting the rural and forest-dwelling communities to a great extent.

### **Emerging challenges for Kandha women**

Over the last few years, human-led so-called development activities have grown in huge numbers in the remote forest areas of the Odisha that are massively impacting the overall landscapes of the forest and hilly regions of the state and forest ecosystems. In the light of these human activities, several challenges have started to surface especially for the women of the Kandha tribe whose associations with the forests seem to be fading with time. One of the most significant factors that have made the lives of the Kandha women extremely challenging in the recent past is the massive deforestations carried out in the state in the name of the developmental projects. The activities like mining, setting-up of the industrial units like power plants etc. have led to the loss of forest cover owing to deforestation and other human activities. The forests that the Kandha people have depended on for generations are rapidly diminishing essentially thanks to the activities like commercial logging, mining, and industrial activities. This has resulted in a significant decline in the availability of NTFPs. Consequently, the livelihood activities of the Kandha women which were primarily based on the forest-based resources have come under serious threat. As Ambagudia (2015) puts it, there is a growing sense of insecurity amongst the tribal communities of Odisha due to the growing distance between them and the forest lands on which they relied for their livelihoods for ages which is also leading to a feeling of dissatisfaction among these communities against the government. The ongoing activities are also leading to the indigenous communities like Kandha tribe losing their control on the forests and its resources which is triggering a conflictual relationship between tribal and non-tribal communities in the state (Ambagudia, 2015; Homer-Dixon, 1991)

Due to the disadvantageous geographical location, the other big challenge that the women of this tribe face is the lack of access to markets and other economic opportunities. Even in some of the forest areas where such developmental projects have not been started yet, NTFPs can be a lucrative source of income. However, the lack of access to markets and other economic opportunities has made it difficult for Kandha women to earn a sustainable income from these forest-based products that they derive from the jungles that poses severe livelihood-related challenges. As a result, while the phenomenon of migration was earlier, seen only amongst the male members of the Kandha tribe, today, many of the Kandha women are also forced to migrate to the cities and towns in search of livelihood sources, which has further increased the distance between these women and the forest.

Another reason behind the growing distance between the Kandha women and the forests of Odisha is the lack of recognition of the traditional wisdom that they have developed related to many aspects of the forests over the centuries and passed them from generation

to generation. Besides, there is no recognition of their rights on the forests and the forest-based resources even as they have been the traditional protectors of the forests for ages. Despite their critical role in forest-based livelihoods, Kandha women's rights and traditional knowledge have often been ignored or marginalized both by the patriarchal structures of the communities, and by the mainstream society who have always looked at these women as the second-line citizens. As a result of such societal structures, they have never been allowed to participate in decision-making processes pertaining to the forests that affect their livelihoods and has also led to the gradual fading-away of the traditional knowledge and practices that have helped the Kandha people sustain their lives and livelihoods for centuries.

### **The growing concern**

There could be two ways of looking at the implications of the growing distance between the women of the Kandha communities and the forest. One could be the impacts on the Kandha people of Odisha and the second could be the impacts of the society in general. One of the most glaring implications of such growing distance that is perpetuated by the increasing deforestation is the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services that the forest provides to such communities residing inside them as well as those inhabiting the areas located in the vicinity of such forests. Traditionally, Kandha women have been playing a significant role in maintaining the ecological balance of the forest by collecting NTFPs from the jungles in a sustainable way and also by conserving biodiversity this way. The loss of such rich traditional knowledge affected by distancing of the Kandha tribal women and their practices could be extremely threatening to the forest ecosystems and the wildlife that inhabit them.

With women being forced to move away from their alliance with the forests, the cultural heritage of the Kandha tribe and the state of Odisha are also endangered. The Kandha people have a rich cultural heritage that is closely linked with the forest areas near their settlements. And the growing distance between Kandha women and the forest rings an alarm bell about the erosion of such rich cultural heritage that has been preserved for centuries. The loss of traditional knowledge and practices, as well as the erosion of cultural identity, could have significant social and psychological implications on the overall well-being of the Kandha people. In many cases, as it has been experienced from many developmental projects which unsettle such communities from their natural habitats, the breaking of such strong bonds of the communities with the nature can lead to a lifetime of traumatic experiences amongst them. Such dissociations not only affect the immediate livelihoods of the affected communities, but in the long run they pose serious threats to the

overall society by putting the overall environmental ecosystem into risks.

Such visibly growing distance between the tribal communities and the forests, as several studies suggest, does have severe economic implications too (Ansari, 2021; Northcott, 2012). Forest-based livelihoods have traditionally been an essential source of income for the Kandha people, and the decline in NTFPs and other forest-based resources have the potential to trigger economic insecurity and poverty amongst the communities depending on the forest resources. And this has a major implication on the overall economic health of the state and thereby the economic state of the country. The apparent migration taking place amongst the Kandha communities in various districts of Odisha like - Rayagada, Kandhamal, Kalahandi, Koraput and others from the rural areas to the urban regions have started indicating these signs of social and economic insecurities. In the long run, such developments in the present scenario, if not addressed with immediate effects could lead to exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities that will pose a challenge to the overall state of economic affairs of the state and the country.

#### **Need to acknowledge the rights and traditional knowledge**

To address a serious problem like this, both the state as well as the civil society needs to take a holistic approach. According to Das et. al. (2020), there is an immediate need both on the part of the government and administration, and the society to promote sustainable forestry practices which would then help in realising the significance of such communities especially the role of women in protecting and conserving the forests. As per the available scholarship around the Kandha women and their relationship with the forests, several measures can be taken. As a part of such measures, efforts must be made to conserve and protect the forests which will in turn also go a long way in protecting the biodiversity that these forests support. In addition to these, promoting sustainable forestry practices, reducing deforestation, and regulating industrial activities in forested areas could prove instrumental in protecting these forests and hence, in supporting the Kandha communities in helping them stay culturally connected to the forests.

Measures must, also, be taken to ensure better access to the markets and other economic avenues for the women of the Kandha tribe in the state which will help them find a place to sell their forest-based products to the common people. This will also be crucial for developing a sound transactional relationship between the Kandha community and the outside world, especially the populations residing in the areas closer to the forests where these communities live. To provide such accessibility to the markets to these women, the government and local administration should aim at developing local markets where these women can come and sell their products directly. Among other relevant measures, the

local level administration should make efforts to identify those women within the Kandha communities who possess some entrepreneurial skills and provide capacity building trainings to them about the enterprising avenues that exist within their culture and with their relationship to the forests. In addition to these, initiatives to facilitate access to credits and other forms of financial services could be of great significance in mainstreaming the occupations of the Kandha communities especially the women.

Studies also suggest that recognising the rights of such indigenous communities on the forests and the forest-based natural resources could be of great significance in protecting the forests as well as strengthening the relationships between the forests and communities depending on them for their livelihood (Bardhan, 2005; Ambagudia, 2011). Besides, recognition of the traditional knowledge of the women of these communities and efforts to preserve their local wisdom could prove to be pivotal in reducing the growing distance between the forests and the Kandha community women.

### **Conclusion**

With the ample evidences surfacing to indicate the challenges in the lives of the Kandha women due to the growing distance between them and the forests, it could be clearly gauged that the largest tribal community of the state of Odisha are becoming vulnerable to the ongoing so-called developmental projects. The industrial and commercial activities being promoted by the state for the short-term commercial gains are threatening the fabrics of the relationship between the tribal communities and the forests that they inhabit which could have major environmental and human implications in the long-run. And once these crises start to manifest with time, they will also have huge bearing on the overall economic condition of the state.

The large-scale deforestations being carried out to facilitate the commercial and industrial activities are resulting in dissociating the tribal communities from the forests especially the Kandha women in the districts like Rayagada, Kandhamal, Koraput, Kalahandi, and others. Besides, the lack of economic opportunities for the Kandha women also leads to their marginalisation posing serious threats to their livelihoods. As a result of this, the traditional local wisdom of these women too is being marginalised and it is adding to their vulnerabilities. The other serious implications on the natural ecology are the loss of biodiversity and the ecosystem services that support the nature's balance in these regions. Such implications are also leading to the erosion of the cultural heritage of the Kandha tribal community besides causing glaring economic insecurity among them.

To address these growing distances between the Kandha women and the forests of

Odisha, it will be necessary for the state government to focus on promoting efforts that encourage sustainable forestry practices to protect the health of the forest ecosystems as well as the livelihood interests of these women. Also, efforts should be made on government and administrative levels to ensure greater economic opportunities to the women of the community and provide them access to the local markets to support their economic sustainability. Recognising the rights of the Kandha women over the forests and natural resources would also go a long way in addressing this ongoing crisis within this tribe. The traditional wisdom of these women around the forests and its resources must also be recognised and preserved as a measure to reduce the growing distance between the Kandha women and the forests.

These measures and the sustained efforts to persist with them would, undoubtedly, ensure the strengthening of the relationships between Kandha community and the forests. Through such measures, the cultural heritage of these tribes could also be preserved that will help the present and future generations to understand the significance of the natural habitats like forests in the lives of these community members. This will also be helpful in deepening the connections between the future generations of the Kandha community and the forests of Odisha.

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