

Bio-diversity Festival: Unique Way of Celebration of Kutia Kondh in Kandhmal district, Odisha:

Bio-diversity Festival locally known as Burlang Yatra was organized at Bikapanga an adivasi village in Khandhamal district of Odisha on February 25 and 26 2016. Burlang Yatra is a traditional festival of Kutia Kondhs celebrated every year where the community especially women worship and exchange seeds through a celebratory mode of songs and dances at village level. However from past four years, the festival in Khandamal part is being facilitated by NIRMAN in collaboration with MINI by gathering women from many villages together to celebrate the same. This year the festival was held at Bikapanga village in Bilamal Gram Panchayat in Tumudibandh block of Khandamal district. Women from about five Gram Panchayats gathered at the village for two days to celebrate the festival.



Villagers of Bikapunga welcomed the women and men who arrived at their village with great affection and honor. Amidst songs and traditional dances, the women groups from each village took a tour around the host village like a procession before they went to place their seeds they brought to share at the common place where everyone including DDS women

farmers placed.

The festival covered series of events including talks, policy dialogues, farmers' experiences, seed exchange, honoring biodiverse farmers and cultural performances.

Picks of the Burlang Yatra

A number of farmers from the community shared their views and concerns through the platform.

“We should stop depending on PDS which fails to help meet our needs. We should produce our own food” urged Ranjita Digal a woman farmer from Birunga village pointing to the inefficiencies in the government programs.



“Millets are the identity of Kutia Kondhs” expressed Pushpanjali Majhi. Millets have been the integral part of both their biodiverse farming and food practices. However there has been a significant decline in the millet diversity and also shift in their food

practice in the community. Festivals like Burlang Yatra bring back the importance of millets and biodiversity to their lives she expressed.

“It’s overwhelming to see women celebrating their seeds, practices and their knowledge. We should transfer this knowledge to our next generation who will continue to keep our families, our communities and our environment healthy” suggested Samamma, a senior woman farmer from Deccan Development Society. “Government should support the millet cultivators by giving processing units to encourage their efforts” demanded Chandamma another farmer seed conserver from DDS.

“Millet Farmers’ demands made it possible for the millets to enter PDS. Similarly farmers through Burlang Yatra should come up with demands to influence policies” advocated Jayasri, Joint Director, Deccan Development Society.



The region faced severe drought this year, however millets helped farmers overcome the difficulty said Prasant Mohanty, Executive Director, NIRMAN. The organization intends to bring more farmers together to voice their concerns he added.

“Millets and biodiverse farming have been a great support system to the communities. However the infringing urban habits are affecting communities’ health” said Mukund Nihal, a special officer from Kutia Kondh Development Agency(KKDA). He discussed how millets can become solution for the current climate crises and malnutrition among the children in the community.

Seed Sharing

Seed sharing remained a highlight of the festival where women shared seeds with younger women thereby transferring their knowledge to next generation.



DDS women farmers carried about **60 varieties** of seeds to display at the festival. Few of them include 10 varieties of Sorghum, three varieties of Foxtail Millet, four varieties of Red gram, three varieties of green gram, three varieties of Horse gram, Niger, Pearl millet, Little millet, Barnyard Millet, Sesame, Flax seeds, Sunflower, mustard etc .



Chandramma exchanged her seeds of with women from Kutia Kondh tribal community. She took seeds of Black Foxtail Millet, Little Millet and Black variety of Cow pea for which she gave her seeds of Red Foxtail millet, Yellow Sorghum and Pearl millet.



Honoring farmers

NIRMAN during the festival honored women farmers found with highest biodiversity on their farms and also those who revived few lost varieties of millet seeds.



The festival ended with vibrant smiles all around with women singing and dancing as they took back with them the seeds they exchanged.

Talking about the festival, Pushpanjali Majhi, a young woman from the community informed that the festival is one among the three festivals the community celebrates. While Maria and Anka are the festivals celebrated to please the gods of nature during the times of climate crisis, Burlang Yatra is celebrated at the times of seed deficit in the community. The community leaders Jaani, Maji and Bejan (woman leader) announce the time of these festivals and they believe that Burlang Yatra, the festival worshipping and exchanging seeds ensures that the community realizes the importance of seeds and overcome the deficit through community seed sharing as they gather to celebrate.



This tribal region experiences only one agricultural season – from June to February while rest of the months are engaged in preparing land for cultivation. Sowing starts with castor followed by pulses, millets, creepers and others that encompass their biodiverse farms. It was overwhelming to see the enormous amount of livestock such as hens, goats, pigs, cows every household kept.

Enveloping forces

Out of many factors, Government interventions in the name of ‘Development’ seemed to have affected these communities’ age old ecological practices. It was observed that government distribution of potato seeds and the chemical fertilizers that come along have become a reason for the shift in farmers’ practice from organic to inorganic. While most men became victims to such interventions, women continue to assert their traditional knowledge and belief systems rejecting government’s support. One can clearly witness how women in this community become the conservers of their knowledge systems, food, nutrition and health.



Kudi Laadu Jaani, a woman farmer during her speech at the festival appealed men of the community to share equal responsibility in farming and other activities informing that their involvement in household activities has been decreasing in recent years.

Women in the community take the central role in every activity from farming, processing and to **decision making.**



Dwelling in the womb of nature, Kutia Kondhs practice an ecological lifestyle. Absence of machinery or any external polluting materials is a sign.

However the fast intruding forces from outside in the name of development is undoubtedly a serious threat to the community. While the efforts by NIRMAN and similar organizations to an extent protect these communities from being exploited, it's the women of the community whose strength, knowledge systems becomes the ultimate weapon to battle the destructive models of so called development.





Exhibition of seeds diversity

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