

Of adivasis, forests and farms - a journey through Jharkand

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In the month of March, a heady fragrance of Mahua flowers, a forest ablaze with flowers of Palash and the sweet taste of Kendhu fruits awaited us at every village we visited in the state of Jharkand between March 19th and 29th. The early days of the journey started with cold rain, thunderstorms and hailstones in Ranchi ending with temperatures up to 38 degrees Celsius in Musabani block by mid-week. The hot winds of the afternoon saw us, (well, especially me), dozing off in the vehicles despite the road conditions.

This was a long overdue journey to a landscape that Keystone has been working in for more than a decade. The Central and Eastern Indian region is a hub of agroecological diversity, adivasi people, dry forests and more. As Rohan M., Jyoti P. and Sushila M. accompanied me on this journey through the landscape - we learnt, talked, laughed, imagined and (re)discovered a place together. To these co-travellers I want to say thank you and wish them all the very best for the good work they dream of doing. An invitation to participate in a meeting organized by the Network for Conserving Central India



(NCCI) at the Kanha tiger reserve was the catalyst to this journey. At Kanha one sees tall majestic Sal towering over all else and stretching across kilometers. Keystone was invited to participate in the fourth roundtable of the NCCI to discuss branding of millet based products value added by local women's groups of the region. The food-growing, farming communities in this area include adivasi groups like the Gond and Baiga, who are seed savers and practitioners of rain fed agriculture. Read more about the roundtable and the women's group at

<https://www.deccanherald.com/india/millets-in-spotlight-as-ncci-hosts-fourth-agrobiodiversity-roundtable-3458862>

I travelled overnight from the quiet serene Sal forests of Kanha to the rapidly concretising jungles of Ranchi city. Here, like everywhere, the city is a rapidly growing organism with fly overs, roads and garbage strewn liberally. Every drop of rain that fell from the sky seemed to collect on the roads thanks to choked sewers. With new infrastructure under construction everywhere and unseasonal rains in full swing, many potholes were fully flooded and vehicles with stranded passengers in them became a regular sight for us.

-At Ranchi, meeting with the Akhra team who have beautifully and silently recorded the struggles and victories of adivasi communities through their award winning documentaries, was inspiring. While Cordula di and Biju da shared their home, movies and books with us, they were keen that we meet with their co-Founder and guide, Meghnath dada. In his own words he is an artist from Malad West who once painted actor Ashok Kumar's house. Dada is currently engaged in making a film on the values of the adivasis whom he has come to know over the years. He talked of three sequences

in the film – an adivasi kite flying festival where the strings are not made with pieces of glass to cut each other off, but as one kite approaches the other is moved away to allow the other to soar even higher; a music festival where there is only one drummer and people just come dance as long as they want and move on with no prizes to be won; and one showing that our loved ones don't die and are sent away, they become our revered ancestors who walk and talk with us. We eagerly await Meghnath Dada's film.

After long discussions and plans with the Keystone team on making the Ranchi office fully functional we set off to visit the districts of Seraikela Kharsawan, East and West Singhbhum on the roads to which we traversed in and out of forests, highways and mountains mined for minerals. Stopping at villages where we could see Keystone's work on agroecology, community based enterprises and forest governance taking shape. The agroecology work has been well received by the people and it has contributed to the diversity of their nutrition baskets. We were received with lunch on leaf plates that bore witness to all that has been grown on their farms and kitchen gardens. It was indeed a special treat and every village showcased their vegetable garden diversity to go along with dals and rice grown in their farms. Self-sufficient for food, we saw very few undernourished mothers and children, though many of the mothers were young and looked like children themselves.



The adivasi people we interacted with were from the Santal, Ho, Bhumij and Munda peoples and other local communities. In every village we were welcomed with sweet fruits of Kendhu and a glass of water. To our questions about their lives and livelihoods they answered patiently, waiting for the talking to end so that they could walk us through their farms and show us their forests. In each conversation when we asked why they needed the money, the one answer we got was 'for the education of our children'. Money was also needed for medical expenses and this was mentioned at some of the villages. In most of our conversations, the impending water shortage of the coming months was brought up - the people were thinking ahead and preparing for the intense summer.

In one of the villages we visited, we were told that the people together had decided that only one wedding was allowed to take place in a week, to offset the burden of everyday needs which would barely be met in the dry season.

From Jharkhand we drove to the borders of Purulia district, to a Santal village where the stark image of a young woman wearing a white saree was a grim reminder of the losses that out-migration and labour conditions bring to this region. Her husband had left for work to Bangalore and months later

his body was brought back to the village for his final rites. For most of the people all through our journey, places in South India, Tamil Nadu or Bangalore were very familiar. Most had good things to say about their work experiences in these states and felt they were treated fairly.



In Purulia we stop at the village of the Sabar people. Landless, and even today considered as petty criminal tribes, they spoke of their struggles to live with dignity. I cannot forget the anger in the voices of one of the women who spoke to us about her people's struggles. She told us how she earns a meagre wage of Rs150 for 8 to 9 hours daily of agriculture work. She was angry that her husband stole her earnings of a thousand rupees only to drink it away. "Why does he not get the children ready for school when I am at work? Why does he steal my hard earned money and why does he drink all day?" These questions were put to us rhetorically and of course we had no ready answers for her. We had asked all the women gathered to meet us what they wished for in their lives, to which they had responded with this and similar struggles. Their children were present with us throughout the meeting and when we asked why they didn't go to

the school which was just across the road, they said simply, 'the children don't like to go to this school!'

After some time we all decided to take a walk through their forests, even though they didn't own the land they were confident that the forest belonged to everyone. As we entered, we found the rest of the village all under the mahua trees collecting the flowers. Before we knew it, many more women and children had joined us and we were almost 20 of us walking through the forest. They showed us their trees and medicinal herbs. It was the children who gathered the flowers of Palash. We ask if there are climbers with Palash flowers and within five minutes the children bring us flowers of the climbing Palash. When one of the women brings a rare medicinal plant to show us, I ask if she thinks the plant is not available as before. She promptly replies "can the forest ever run out?"

On our way out of the forest one of the men broke into songs and the women joined in effortlessly. It all seemed so surreal, a walk through the jungles and the joyous singing as we walked back. Later, the meaning of the song was translated for us – *"we are all on a journey through our lives, one can never know when one enters and when one has to leave, it's only the road that is ours"*. The main singer Sombu Sabar sings and translates for us in Bengali. He invited us for their annual Sabar mela, where we can hear more of this music.

A journey of ten days through the Central and Eastern India landscape leaves us with fond memories of people, forests, farms and food. Each day the team sat together to debrief on ways to engage meaningfully in these areas on issues of improving water security, strengthening forest conservation, saving traditional food crops and their seeds, addressing issues of access to fair markets etc. We were reflecting on these with the help of lessons learnt on eco-development in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve working with adivasi people of the mountains over thirty years, thousands of kilometres away. What lessons could be replicated and what new ones are we setting out to learn? After all, similar issues persist - adivasi people who have always been part of their natural resource rich landscapes are still living impoverished lives.

