

INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S STORIES OF CO-EXISTENCE WITH NATURE



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DHAATRI

A Resource Centre for Women and Children

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ABOUT DHAATRI

Dhaatri is an NGO working for the rights of women and children in India and the protection of the ecological resources and women's knowledge practices. We are a platform to amplify the voices of women, their struggles and demands for gender equality and environmental justice.

INTRODUCTION

For Indigenous Women, Co-existence with their eco-systems and life in the forest has many joys and also challenges. Navigating in the forest from birth to death for all their daily needs, there is much that is bounteous for their food, health, economics and spirituality. Yet there is not always harmony in co-existence as conflict and tensions in the sharing of spaces with other forest beings is also an accepted reality, yet negotiated with skill, forbearance and in a spirit of accommodation. Traditionally they say, there was a tacit understanding between humans and wildlife where they knew not to trespass into each other's territories. If they occasionally did, it was tragic but accepted.

As one Gadaba Indigenous elder once said, *'the tiger is our elder brother and he knows our Gadaba language. That is why we are not afraid of him. But these days he is getting confused with other new languages and then there's trouble'*.

Therefore, today, they both dread each other and they both are forced to trespass into each other's spaces for their struggle to survive. For both, their spaces have considerably shrunk, with forests given away for industries and development needs. Boundaries have become indistinctive, yet each still tries to negotiate for their needs within their customary principles of forest laws. Sometimes, the agility of both helps in avoiding harm. Yet at times, distress for foraging and hunting makes each other cross paths, in not too friendly a manner. Then, either one or both are injured and sometimes succumb in the struggle. Most often, their inherent instincts, life-skills and courage help them retreat with minimum harm. But not always are they fortunate.

Increasingly nowadays, as forest spaces are diverted by external societies, the tensions between Adivasis and wildlife is intensifying, with human loss and injury becoming a constant reality. Their tacit language is forcibly getting blurred as external forces interfering in their landscapes make hunger and starvation of both, more acute. Yet women have to brave the forests for their food and firewood and many other things, and are increasingly putting themselves and their infants at risk, when they go into the forest.

We bring here some stories of Indigenous women's traditional knowledge practices in the forest, stories of bravery and skills of coping with wildlife and forest losses and their ever evolving exploration of resilient strategies to co-exist, their very own **nature based solutions**. It is only their spiritual wisdom, perhaps, that gives them the resilience and strength to live with their losses, pain and often, criminal cases slapped on them, while they struggle to live in their own native landscapes.

The global world today says we are creating **nature-based solutions** to beat climate crisis. There are many questions that dwell in many an unspoken word of Indigenous Women. Can the external world genuinely bring **nature-based solutions** at the cost of stifling the native wisdoms and co-existence of Indigenous people and their other fellow forest beings. Can nature be nurtured through destroying its biodiversity and throwing out the people who understand it the most.

We bring some local stories and glimpses into the daily life of communities who have been practicing **nature-based solutions** as their only way of life. It has become unsafe for the Adivasi and the tiger and the several small species who are rapidly getting extinct. These knowledge practices are getting ineffective and flawed, with complex pressures brought upon the communities who are getting unskilled and unschooled from their forest wisdoms.

Our work with Adivasi Women has been a daily learning from the many small conversations and oral narratives shared by them. We felt that these casually shared stories carry innumerable clues as the world is trying to grapple with climate crisis. Their local coping strategies may hold answers, if we care to listen like the tiger, to the language of the Gadabas, the Oraons, the Mundas, the Yanadis and Gonds and the many Indigenous peoples of India and the world.

We present here some random glimpses into the local knowledge, pain, humour and forest wisdoms from the Indigenous Women in India.

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BATTLING WITH THE HYENA

Deep in the forests of Jharkhand in Central India live the Oraons, Mundas and other forest dwelling communities. The Adivasis in Chatra came to settle here many decades ago, after being relocated from their original homes for various development projects in Jharkhand. The thick jungles offered them livelihood and food.

Damini is from the Oraon community in a small hamlet of Chatra. She recalls, in one of our conversations with her about her injuries, her experience of how she encountered a wild hyena and just about managed to save her daughter from being attacked. She herself got badly injured in the struggle to escape.



“The tragic event occurred in the year 1980, when I was young and newly married.”

" It was just another day. Everyone in the village was preoccupied with their daily chores."

" Houses in our village are quite separated from one another. To meet neighbours, one must walk long distances”.



" I went to collect sticks, wood, and branches from the forest to sell in the market. My husband was not at home during that time and I had nobody to look after my 1 year old daughter.

So I carried her with me into the forest on my back, cradled in my saree, as it was not safe to leave her in the house all alone. "





" While I was returning from the forest to my village, suddenly a wild hyena appeared in the distance, standing and snarling through the woods, behind tall grass."

" Alarmed and terrified me, I couldn't move an inch further. I was too afraid to take any step forward. So, I decided to halt instantly without making any sound."

" Hyena was glaring at me from the shadows of the wood. I could see him."

" It had a body of white grey stripes, a large head with a long, thick, muscular neck and powerful jaws."

" It began to approach us slowly and steadily. And then, in the blink of an eye, it jumped and attacked my daughter."

" I fought back fearlessly. I would go to any lengths to protect my daughter. Even so, the hyena continued to attack us."



" In my attempt to save my daughter and myself from the claws of the hyena, I nearly lost my one eye. His razor-sharp teeth pierced my palm and bit me all over my body."

" The wounds were deep and scratches were all over my body, and I lost a lot of blood. Nevertheless, somehow I managed to scare the wild animal away from us with all my might and will power. Miraculously, it backed off into the forest."



" I cried and shouted for help. Two men passing by noticed us and quickly came to our aid. At first, they were quite hesitant looking at my wounds and then they came with me and my child to the nearby hospital." " Even in my terrible condition, with wounds all over my body and one eye bleeding profusely, I mustered all my strength to carry my child strapped on my back, to the hospital."



" When I reached the hospital the doctors instructed me to meet the District Collector (DC) first, before any medical examination. So I did, with all my injuries."

"The DC ordered for a medical check-up but I couldn't afford the medicines and surgeries that the doctors said I had to have, as they were too expensive."

" When DC learned about the incident and the situation I was in, he promised to pay for my and my daughter's full treatment, plus an additional compensation of Rs. 10,000 for my bravery."



" Unfortunately, I received no response from the authorities as the days passed. The issue became less important to them over time and was pushed to the side lines."

" I was completely dejected and felt helpless. But one fine day, I was finally able to meet DC. I went up to him and enquired about my compensation and medical care."

He replied, " अरे, आपका पैसा तो खतम हो गया , हम चोरी कर के लाएँ जैसे अब ? ये लो 1000 रुपय रख लो | (arrey, your money got finished, now should I go somewhere and steal the money for you?-here take this 1000 rupees and keep it)"

"In the end, I never received the funds, nor did I receive proper medical treatment."

" In this tragic incident, I not only lost my vision in one eye, but also my ability to hear from one ear, and yet here I am, living my life as if it were just another day of survival with my family."

After all these years, Damini still goes into the forest every day as the forest is her life.

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In the foothills of the Nallamalai forests of Andhra Pradesh live the Yanadis-a tribe who are native to the islands of Sriharikota. They have traditionally been known for their wide knowledge of wild plants and medicinal herbs in the forest and used to gather and sell these in the towns for their survival. An extremely poor and vulnerable tribe, they were relocated from their coastland and scattered across in many districts. Never owning any land, their traditional skills lay in trapping rodents and snakes, collecting wild tubers and medicinal herbs, as well as fishing patiently in the local ponds and lakes. Otherwise, many became bonded agricultural labour in the houses of rich landlords as faithful work horses, never groaning or complaining. So much so that, their tolerance became an advantage to bring them under the Criminal Tribes Act which crucified many an innocent Yanadi for crimes not committed.



We can find some of them in the region of Gudur, near Tirupati today, working as daily wage labour in the stone and silica mines, when not hunting for rodents or herbs. For them, catching rats and snakes are like child-play and they are hired by farmers to protect their crops.





One day Yadamma, an elderly matriarch of a Yanadi village was working alone in her mango orchard which she got as a gift from the government.

While moving around and
digging to clear the bushes...





She suddenly stepped over a Viper's hood which instantly wound its whole body around Yadamma's leg and made her immobile with its grip. Luckily she was wearing chappals and was not barefoot.



She tried to pull it away, only to see the snake tightening it's grip further.

Unable to see anyone in a distance, she took out her mobile phone which her daughter had gifted her after she got a government job, from the folds of her saree, and called her son.

Unperturbed with the venomous hood under her foot, she instructed her son to rush to the farm with the neighbours and waited patiently with the viper hissing under her foot and gripping her all over her leg.



When the villagers rushed to her spot, she gave them instructions to tug at the tail of the snake very hard and swish it away, just when she removed her foot.





She said, “ they were all standing on one side of me and I had to jump in the same instant that they pulled the snake. We needed to coordinate with precision, otherwise it would bite me. I wanted to see that we could throw it away without killing it and that was my only option ”.

The instant she gave the signal, they swiftly grabbed the tail and pulled it hard to one side, while she jumped to the other side.





“ It was done so fast that the snake had no chance to bite me. I fell on one side near the tree and the snake went sailing high in the sky and was thrown far away by my son and neighbours. ”



"Luckily, both of us got saved and we saw it slithering away into the forest," she guffaws.

When I told her I would have been dead with fright even before the snake bit me, she laughs and says, “if you get scared, the snake will know. You have to stay firm and not move and then surprise it!”

For her, it’s just another small confrontation with nature as many such others in all her long years of dealing with these creatures. A close shave with death - but that’s life in the forest for Yamma. Yanadis fear not snakes as they have to co-exist with them and children accompany their parents in these hunts and learn the skills early on.

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