

Common Hosts Uncommon Guests: Looking beyond the economically important inter species relations in the forests of North Bastar

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Through this paper I wish to foreground and explore how interspecies relations within a forest have a robust conception of value beyond the economical conception of 'exchange value'. The commonly occurring trees of the forests of North Bastar region such as Kusum, Sahjha, Mahua, Harra, Behra, Sihari, Tendu, Chind, and Sur along with their dependent fauna constitute a plethora of plant and animal species which have an intimate relationship with the lives of the forest dwelling Gond community locally known as *Koyaturs*¹.

I have attempted to organize the paper in a way so as to juxtapose the 'logic of economy' and the 'logic of ecology'. The purpose of such a juxtaposition being to foreground how a change of perception might uncover hitherto overlooked, unknown and ignored aspects of the forest; how a culture of ignorance and denial amongst the administrative bureaucracy have foreclosed such relationships and have historically justified the 'economic logic' through which the Forests are administered, governed and utilized as a resource. I want to emphasize on how the shift in perspective allows us to explore the forest as a completely different place from the way it is portrayed by the forest department and often the portrayal is used to justify their scientific hegemony which reinforces the political and commercial purpose of the state owned corporations.

Coincidentally the leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, tree saps, roots, stems, bark and even few insects which form an essential network of interspecies relations which sustains life within the forest remain classified as Minor Forest Produce or Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) under the bureaucratic nomenclature of the state.

While researching the interspecies relationships I faced a few methodological challenges. Parts of the relationship that I speak of were observable and parts of it also exists as stories, myths and beliefs. Hence I attempted to compliment the epistemic and observable truths with the ontological understanding of such uncommon (unconventional) beliefs. My chosen methods included close examination of the narratives collected through interviews, facilitated conversations and participant observation of various rituals where the trees, leaves flowers, animals and the insects are enmeshed in a symbiotic relationship. During my prolonged engagement I complimented my epistemic enquiries through rural immersions² to realize the ontology of how trees and a few

1 Koyaturs is a Gondi word which literally means Mahua People. Koya: *Mahua*, tur: people or beings; consequently it also means people or beings who live amongst the Mahua forests.. An alternative etymology of Koytur is from the Gondi word Kok: Womb of the mother. Tur: Beings consequently meaning: Beings who come from the womb of the mother. Gonds of Bastar often identify themselves as Koyaturs.

2 Rural Immersions are a method through which researchers stay and establish close bonds with the community to experience as closely as possible certain ethos which otherwise escapes epistemic enquiry. Immersion is an ontological experience of truth unlike an epistemic examination of truth.

inter-dependent animal species were adopted as symbols of worship, basis of identity, basis of societal organization and finally constitute an ethic of coexistence amongst the Koyatur life world.

Drawing upon Eduardo Kohn and Bruno Latour I wish to navigate through the narratives and hope to find traces of an ethic(s) especially through a sense of agency and accountability which had sustained the long standing inter species relations that the Koyaturs had with the flora and the fauna that surrounds them especially at a time when the forces of Development endangers their life not just through rampant clearing of their forested habitat but also through a systematic denial of their knowledge systems and beliefs.

'The Forest' as a place for production

The Forests as the bureaucracies see it, is a 'Noun'. A naming thing, a whole with certain defining qualities. The forest is understood as a place where various plants, trees, animals, birds, insects have made their natural habitat. Administrators also see it as a habitat for human beings; human beings of a certain kind. Those who are considered to be at the margins of our 'civilization'. The forest is largely seen as a whole. A whole with components i.e. the flora and the fauna. A whole which has a certain order and organization, an asset from which a spectrum of goods and resources can be acquired and which needs to be managed and protected by rules and laws. The perspectives may vary a little about the laws and who they protect the resource from! Who may have right over the resources? Whether it will be those who bring remittances to the nation and add to its wealth or whether it should belong to those who had lived within the 'forest'; but by and large civilization has seen the forest as a resource.

Consequently it has created its own set of hierarchies of the components that constitute the forest. Since it identified the forest as a resource the basis of the hierarchies too have been derived from an understanding of 'value' which is essentially based on transaction and exchange. In other words the hierarchies were derived out of the 'exchange value' of the components that we can exchange as products in our markets. Based on this 'logic of economy' the forest gets commercially classified and managed. The economics of the forest provide the administrators the rationale of governing it. A rationale that identifies timber as a product of primary importance, with the highest 'rate of exchange' hence greater 'exchange value' and the rest becomes only secondary to it. The rest of the 'forest' apart from the trunks of the trees that populate it gets classified as 'non' timber or as minor forest produce.

Those who live within 'the forest' and consequently at the fringe of our 'civilization' although finds it difficult to classify the forest based on its 'exchange' value. They on the other hand depend heavily on the use of those 'components' in their daily lives often for survival. Such use of the 'components' have often allowed them to have a far deeper understanding of the forest and the nature around them. For them the flowers, leaves, tree saps, molds, animals, birds and insects have greater value because these beings are not just life-less components which could

be exchanged for money but rather 'living beings' which allow the human communities which live in the forest to adapt to their environment over generations (Robbins, 2018).

My interactions with the forest dwelling people of Uttar Bastar reveal that they consider the forest as (a) living being(s) who live together like a community. The living beings that constitute the forest are believed to have spirits, 'pens' and every spirit must remain happy and perform its duties for the well being of the forest dwellers. Trees, river, mountains, animals all have spirits which must communicate and participate in constituting the factors which will support life within the habitat.

Interestingly such knowledge, beliefs and perspectives in their everyday practice and interactions do not exist as dyads. Their world views are not in opposition to the commercial logic of the civilized world. The forest dwelling adivasis of Uttar Baster have learnt to adapt, negotiate and navigate seamlessly in-between the two world views. For them both the economic and the extra- economic matters! The commercial hierarchy of the 'components' although could not be denied are instead negotiated with. Studies reflect that for over 75 lakh Adivasis across central and eastern India... mahua is a major cash crop. They eat the flower, barter it for grain, and sell it for cash."(Jha & Vittalamurthy, 2018) again they also brew, drink, eat and offer mahua to their ancestral spirits to solemnize all their life rituals.

Tendu leaf, another Minor Forest Produce (MFP) is used to roll beedi³. it is the financial lifeline of the forest dwellers of central India. Adivasi's collect the leaf as part of their rights defined under 'Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA)'. The collection rate of tendu leaf is approximately Rs. 1,250⁴ per Standard Bag or 50,000 leaves in Madhya Pradesh but this trade does not prevent them from collecting tendu fruits and offering them at Pandums as a symbol of respect to fruit that saves them when their crops fail.

Apart from Mahua and Tendu leaf other 'produces' such as lac, salbeeja, sal leaf, tamarind, tussar cocoons, chironjee, amchur (dried mango), jamun (berries), and raar (farkainscence) are also extremely important sources of income and livelihood but beyond those identities each of these entities have an elaborate significance within the crypted everyday of the adivasis.

3 beedi: Hand rolled cigarettes

4 Rate of tendu as per Madhya Pradesh State Minor Forest Produce Federation is 1250 per standard bag

The forest as an Assemblage:

All life is a process of connection and interaction. Anybody or thing is the outcome of a process of connections (Colebrook, 2002)

As I continued to collate the experiences of forest dwellers and also experienced the forest myself across the five seasons; I slowly realized that the forest does not remain the same place throughout the year. It also does not provide a constant flow of resources. During spring and early summer the forest is rife with mahua flowers and immatured mango flowers, slowly as the flowers get pollinated and a majority of them start falling off the tree, the adivasis start collecting them, although they do not touch them until the time of pollination is over. The pandum⁵ (a ritual) governs such behavior. As collection of mahua stops by the mid weeks of April the mangoes start appearing on the branches, again mangoes are not plucked until the time is ripe and the seeds have matured enough to be dispersed. By the end of April and early May the pandum of mango gets celebrated and mangoes are plucked. By mid of May the Tendu trees shoot out a fresh flush of young leaves. The forest looks green and fresh and within a couple of weeks throngs of women and men start gathering Tendu leaves. By the end of May leaves are dried, packed and sold and people start working on their respective agricultural plots; some dry mangoes, vegetables and tubers to fill their provisions for the upcoming monsoon. The rest remain busy working on their plots for the impending rains which generally hits central India by the mid weeks of June. As the first spell of showers come in. The young and the old head out early morning into the deep woods collecting mushrooms which pop up as the rains wash the forest. A popular belief amongst villagers is that if it thunders while raining then the next morning they will get lots of mushrooms. The early spell of rains also signal the time to scrape off lac from Kusum and Palash trees.

There is no one forest, with the changing seasons various creepers, crawlers, vines, moulds, animals, insects and birds appear and disappear from the forest. There is no fixed whole although it holds on to a territory, although it retains an identity. The forest is what its components make of it as it moves with time. The forest is not a static, constant whole but a living dynamic entity which keeps changing. Perhaps such a paradox can be understood through a philosophical concept. Perhaps one can conceptualize the forest as what Giles Deleuze would call an Assemblage, an arrangement of components which does not reproduce one fixed predetermined result yet appears to occupy a territory and retains an identity.

J Macgregor Wise, an eminent Deluzian scholar interprets the understanding of the concept of assemblage as

5 Pandum: A seasonal ritual which the Gonds practice before they start consuming a seasonal fruit, grain, sap, flower, leaf or root. it involves offering the spirits of the forest and their ancestors the first produce before consumption. it also acknowledges the role of human consumption in the dispersal of seeds and pollen and hence the expansion of the forest habitat.

"putting together", "arrangement", "laying out", "layout" or "fitting' (Cousin et al. 1990: 9-10). It is important to note that (it)... is not a static term; it is not the arrangement or organization but the process of arranging, organizing, fitting together. The term as it is used in Deleuze and Guattari's work is commonly translated as assemblage: that which is being assembled. An assemblage is not a set of predetermined parts (such as the pieces of a plastic model aeroplane) that are then put together in order or into an already-conceived structure of a model aeroplane). Nor is assemblage a random collection of things, since there is a sense that an assemblage is a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory.

The extant traditional practices of the Koyaturs reflect an acknowledgement of the contingencies of the arrangement of life processes with in the forest. Apart from the Pandums other practices such as construction of house, making of bricks, making of agricultural equipments, societal arrangement, marriages, birth and death rituals reflect the changing, ever evolving aspect of the forest and also reflects an active agency on behalf of the community to protect this change; as it is this changing nature that indicates the life of the forest.

Narratives: Interspecies relations in Uttar Bastar

Amongst other things a large part of 'Life' in Bastar revolves around leaves, flowers, roots, fruits, tree saps and insects. Unlike our lives which revolves more around monetized exchange, people in Bastar organize their lives around what might be called an inter-species reciprocity. Animals, plants, birds and insects and humans draw from each other what they need. each offer themselves to the other for the other's survival around the seasons.

Ram Nareti hails from *Hanpatri*, a small village about sixty five kilometers away from the district town of Kanker. A self inspired sculptor, and a *patel* from a very young age. All his life he has been at the helm of all the events that his community organizes. He was one of my many guides who helped me learn what the forest meant for the Gonds and the Gonds were to the forest. On a nippy January night as the dancing men and women of the Gotuls were preparing for their ceremonial Kolang dance, Ram Nareti explained to me how he learnt to find his way through the forests, learn about the plants and animals and how each *Pandum* was significant for the forest to live.

Ram Nareti taught me how to identify Kusum, Shajha from their leaves, bark and proximity to other trees such as Mahua. As Ram Nareti spoke it seemed as if I could hear Peter Wohlleben speak from his book *The secret Life of Trees*. Like Wohlleben Nareti too feels that trees communicate, he said that Shajha, Pharsa, Mahua, Khajur and Kusum are pens, (spirits) often ancestral spirits who co-habit with them. They share their nutrition and protect each other. Hence I should be certain that if I find a Kusum tree in a grove then a Shajha or a Mahua tree would be found very close.

He said that every season in the Gondi Calendar is marked by a *Pandum*, a ritual that is to be performed before any fruit, seed, flower or leaf is used for human use or consumption. He went on further to explain that these rituals have a reason beyond the 'furman⁶' of the human. It was to pay respect to the life of the pen (i.e. the spirit that resides within the elements of the forest. According to him the pens' govern the balance of the earth by assigning duties. Human's have the duty of dispersing seeds, protecting certain species or even to hunt certain other species. Pandum's are the rituals which facilitates such governance.

A recent study by two journalist Jha and Vittalamurthy also reinforced Ram Nareti's explanation of Pandums. "*Pandum* is not just a celebration but a way to maintain biodiversity by sustainable consumption. It ensures that Gonds don't eat a fruit till its fully mature and its seeds can develop into saplings." (Jha & Vittalamurthy, 2018)

In another conversation Ram Nareti explained how *Tonda* (birth), *manda* (wedding) and *konda* (death) are the three axes around which life goes around for Gonds; all three axes requires a close co-relation with the mahua tree; its leaves, branches, flower and the brewed spirit from mahua flowers. As soon as a child is born, the detached umbilicus of the child is dipped in mahua spirit to prevent infection. Marriage the next most important event of an individual's life does not get fixed without an exchange of mahua spirits. During marriage the mandap (which signifies a shelter for the conjugal couple) is made out of a mahua tree branch; finally during death as the being passes into the spirit world and continues to reside with the family mahua is served ritually to respect the spirit of the ancestor.

Sher Singh Anchala of Dumkasa is a well known and respected elder amongst the Gonds of Uttar Bastar, he considers Bats as sacred as they eat and disperse the seeds of mahua tree. He says that mahua is a flower of immortality, it dries out after picking but as soon as it gets water it springs back to life. The popular Gondi imagination of 'Heaven' is a space where there are miles and miles of mahua trees and according to popular beliefs bats make it possible. In a study published in the journal *Global Ecology and Conservation* on May 2018 Mahandran, Thiruchenthil Nathan and their colleagues reported that the Indian flying fox, the short nosed fruit bat fed on mahua fruits and are instrumental in the dispersal of seeds. Apart from bats, the Koyaturs believe that one of their ancestral deity, Lingo pen divided their community into 750 gotras (sects) based on filial affiliations of twelve primeval ancestral spirits or pens. Each of the seven fifty sects protect 1 bird, 1 animal and 1 plant species. They do not consume it themselves neither do the help others kill their totemic species. In all the Koyatur leaders such as Sher Singh Anchala claim to protect over two thousand varieties of plants, animals and insect varieties.

⁶ Furman is a Gondi word which has made its way into the Chhtattigarhi dialect commonly spoken in Uttar Bastar. It translates in 'Well Being'.

Ramkumar Mandavi of Banoli walks down to the forest every morning. On a chilly December morning he took me along to the forest and started gathering a brown, rough skinned fruit from the ground, resembling *chickoo* (sapodilla). When I asked what fruit it was he replied

“This is the fruit of the tendu tree. When dried, it remains good for 4-5 months. Those of us who do not have enough grain, use it as a good source of food. It has become a rarity in the last 30-35 years because tendu plants are not allowed to grow into trees which would give fruit.”

Women from the Koyatur villages often go to forest to collect leaves, They gather leaves of various kinds for various purposes. Amongst the many kinds of leaves that are found in the forest tendu, sal (sarai), mahua, kusum, pharsa, koriya, chind and sihari are the most common varieties that are collected. While dried out chind stems and leaves are used for making shades, tendu and sal for smoking, sal (sarai), sihari and koriya for making plates and donas (leaf cups) for eating and drinking; mahua and kusum are gathered for their medicinal properties and hence used in various healing rituals and practices. Mahua and koriya leaves also have a role to play in marriage. Unmarried women and men avoid having food on plates made out of mahua leaves or koriya leaves. After marriage which is solemnised by the mahua tree the women of the household offer their first cooked grains after harvesting (ritually called *nawa khawi pandum*) to their pens on plates made of koriya or pharsa leaves.

Question of ethics: Sharing the territory; ---

The intricacies of such interspecies relationships seeps into all life activities that the Koyaturs practice. The proximity and the intensity of their life is so enmeshed that the rhetoric and the phonetics of their language also mimics and reflects the sounds that they have been hearing in the forest. Sher Singh Anchla is involved in collating words to compile a Gondi dictionary and according to him a large number of words on his list mimics sounds of birds and animals. The very 'being' of adivasis in Uttar Baster in general and Koyaturs in particular cannot be isolated from the inter species relations that they forge within their forested habitat.

At this juncture the critical question is not just about an extended exploration of such relationships but rather of an active cognizance of the ethic(s) of sharing a territory with other species. Unlike the civilized, enlightened non adivasis' the adivasi communities such as the Koyaturs portray through their being and through their desires an intent to extend the agency of deciding the 'what' of the territory beyond the human. They understand the importance to look beyond the anthropocentric vision. More often than not the territory of the 'common' (that which is shared by humans and other species) is decided more on economic terms, where one species acquires precedence over others purely based on an economic understanding of the value of the species. The other species and their needs remain as a residue, an uncommon. On the other hand we the so called civilized do little more than study such mal practices and calibrate their impact. Except for a few exceptions where we utilize such traditional

ecological knowledge (TEK) (Robbins, 2018) we reduce such knowledge to a stature of museumized artifacts which contributes little to the 'scientific rationales' that tell us what to draft for our environmental policies and how to measure crisis. Latour's paper titled *Agency at the time of the Anthropocene* helps us to remind ourselves that:

While the older problem of science studies was to understand the active role of scientists in the construction of facts, a new problem arises: how to understand the active role of human agency not only in the construction of facts, but also in the very existence of the phenomena those facts are trying to document? The many important nuances between facts, news, stories, alarms, warnings, norms, and duties are all mixed up. This is why it is so important to try to clarify a few of them anew. Especially when we are trying to understand how we could shift from economics to ecology, given the old connection between those two disciplines and the “scientific world view”. (Latour 2014)

The so called civilized, enlightened bureaucracy which has the 'technical' knowledge of managing the forests of Bastar perhaps needs to be reminded of this warning that Latour gives before we end up losing along with the Gondi language the ethics of care and preservation that the Koyaturs have managed to preserve over generations for the well being of their Habitat and I sincerely hope that we are not too late.

List of trees with (Scientific Names) :

SI No:	Common Name	Latin Name
1	Kusum	Carthamus tinctorius
2	Sahjha,	Terminalia tomentosa
3	Mahua	Maduca indica
4	Harra	Terminalia chebula
5	Behra	Terminalia bellerica
6	Sihari,	
7	Tendu	Diospyrus melanoxylon
8	Chind	Phonenix Dactylifera
9	Sur	Caryota (Genus) Fishtail Palm
10	Koriya	Holarrhena hantidysenerica

(Shukla and Singh, 2014)

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