

# Niyamgiri tribe revive wild harvests after Vedanta victory

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[Judicious use of wild uncultivated foods and revival of indigenous crops are helping the Dongria Kondh tribe of Niyamgiri to boost food security beyond their successful campaign against mining giant Vedanta.](#)

**Dongria women at a seed festival. (Photo by Susanta Dalai)** The Dongria Kondhs of Odisha, one of India's vulnerable tribal groups, have been living in the foothills of Niyamgiri for centuries. Niyamgiri is their supreme God. They call the hills Niyam Raja. Niyamgiri hill range that spans across Rayagada and Kalahandi districts is also one of the most important biodiversity hotspots in the Eastern Ghats of India. The region has witnessed a history of struggle by Dongria communities to protect Niyamgiri from Vedanta Resources, a London-based company that was awarded a contract to mine bauxite from Niyamgiri. From the very beginning, the Dongrias vehemently resisted the proposal as Niyamgiri is their source of livelihood. Thanks to the support and solidarity from community-based organizations, civil societies and international agencies, the Supreme Court of India gave a historic verdict in favor of the Dongrias, banning Vedanta's mining project. While the Dongrias' resistance against mining got wide public attention, the other problems they face go unnoticed. Traditional crops such as millets, pulses and tubers besides uncultivated foods from the forests that ensured their food and nutritional security since millennia are on the verge of extinction. The influx of outsiders has resulted in the introduction of hybrid crops and chemical inputs in to the hinterlands. The Dongrias' once self-sufficient agricultural system that relied on local resources has been affected by the introduction of commercial high-yielding paddy. High-yielding crop varieties have resulted in the loss of numerous landraces with important traits. With the rapid disappearance of indigenous varieties, the Dongrias have become dependent on commercial seed suppliers. With efforts involving the community, land races and uncultivated food systems are being revived to ensure food and nutrition security of the Dongrias. Reviving indigenous crops Susanta Dalai, a development professional living among the Dongrias to understand their low carbon lifestyle, encouraged the community to revive indigenous crops to ensure food sovereignty and resilience against climate change. As part of sensitising the Dongria communities on the importance of preserving indigenous crops, open village days were organised to provide a platform to discuss, share knowledge and raise awareness about crop diversity, besides preservation and multiplication of endangered seed varieties. Farmers from neighboring villages were invited to observe demonstration plots. The emphasis was on in-situ conservation of landraces. Dongrias were sensitized to preserve and cultivate landraces in their fields. Continuous use of indigenous crops and involving farmers in crop improvement and plant breeding have resulted in crop diversity. Kala mali phulo is a lowland, drought-tolerant and flood-resistant indigenous paddy variety. "No extra irrigation is required to grow kala mali phulo. Rain water is sufficient. It's a three-month crop. It can be stored for long periods. It has good germination power," Kurmali Majhi, a farmer, told VillageSquare.in. According to Ghana Majhi, a Dongria farmer of Sindhbahal village, his family used to grow 12 varieties of millets. Farmers like Ghana were encouraged to revive mixed-cropping and inter-cropping of pulses besides finger, pearl, kodo, proso, little, barnyard and foxtail millets. "Pulses and millets need less maintenance and less water but give high yield, ensuring food and nutritional security. We don't need bio-fortified GM crops like golden rice when we have naturally bio-fortified crops such as pulses and millets," said Susanta Dalai. "We usually reserve a part of the harvest to be used as seed for the next season. We also exchange varieties of seeds with neighboring farmers," Raibari Sisaka informed VillageSquare.in. Thus farmers produce grain and seed, while maintaining landraces that are suited to the local conditions. Eight years after starting their conservation efforts, the Dongrias have revived many indigenous crops. Security from uncultivated foods Many wild plant species serve as important sources of protein, fats, vitamins and minerals. Dalai is working on promoting conservation and rational use of wild food plants once found abundantly in the region. Throughout Niyamgiri, uncultivated plants provide a vital source of livelihood for the Dongrias. "Uncultivated plants have multifunctional roles which add diversity to local food system, reinforce local culture and contribute diversity to farming systems. They are equally important for ensuring food, nutrition, social, and economic security," said Susanta Dalai. "We collect flowers, fruits, tubers, leaves, stems, seeds, wild mushrooms, tamarind, bamboo shoots and edible insects from the forest," Nelai Majhi, a Dongria woman, told VillageSquare.in. For instance, the leaves of the Mahua tree provide fodder while the flowers are used to make jaggery, liquor or porridge. The fruits are cooked and consumed as a vegetable dish. The seed is crushed to yield cooking oil and the residual cake is a valuable manure for farm crops. But over the years, due to unrestrained logging in Niyamgiri, the forest cover has been decreasing at an alarming rate. After a series of awareness campaigns on forest protection in several Dongria villages, the Dongrias now play a key role in protecting the forest from timber mafia and poachers. Special focus was given on sensitizing women as they possess knowledge and experience in harvesting forest produce and in preparing food from the same. In addition, systematic documentation of uncultivated plants has been taken up to check extinction of important species. [Safety net](#) "It has also been observed that uncultivated food acts as a vital safety net against the increasing trend of crop failure caused by climate change, erratic rainfall, and ecological degradation, including groundwater depletion, degraded soil and decimated biodiversity," said Susanta Dalai. Tubers play a crucial role especially in the lean season when availability of food at home is insufficient. Tubers of certain species are made into curry, while some are boiled and eaten. Some others are cut, dried and made into flour and cooked. For instance popular pani aru is sweet and eaten raw. Pit aru is acrid in taste. Its hairy coat is removed, the tuber is sliced and left in running water for two to three days to remove the bitterness. Similarly, flowers of several plant species are also cooked and eaten. Flowers are first boiled and then fried by adding salt and spices. Jerhul flowers available in spring are popular for their delicious taste. There is a large number of uncultivated edible fruit plants. Some are eaten raw either ripe or unripe while others are consumed after cooking. Some of the fruits are used for making pickle and some are made into chutney. Karmata, korkotta, pakare and badru are cooked and eaten as a vegetable dish. Varieties of leaves are also collected in different seasons, cooked and eaten along with boiled rice. Some leaves are collected from the forest; some are weeds in their cultivated lands or in open village fields. Plant species such as chakor are sun-dried and preserved for use in off-season. **Way forward** Increasing farmers' access to a wide variety of traditional seeds and planting materials will help them become more resilient to the ever-increasing climatic hazards. Secondly, uncultivated wild foods form a major source of food security for the people in Niyamgiri. Yet these are largely neglected in food programs and policies. There is an urgent need to document and develop an inventory of important plant species. "Policies on climate change, conservation, food security and agriculture need to be integrated to recognise and preserve the importance of uncultivated food," said Susanta Dalai. Farmers have a critical understanding of traditional local varieties and their manifold uses honed through generations of farming. The importance of this knowledge and know-how should not be overlooked while developing agricultural policies and schemes. First published by [Village Square](#)