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MANGO season in the hills

- [MEENAL TATPATI](#)



MANGOES GALORE: Waiting to ripen. Photo: C.V. Subrahmanyam



FRUIT OF THE GODS: Sticky sweet aroma pervades the hills. Photo: Ashish Kothari

The Dongria Kondh revere the mango tree. Being an agricultural forest community, they understand the important role this canopy tree plays in their survival.

On a particularly sultry summer's day last year, my colleagues and I were trudging uphill through the dense forests of the Niyamgiri hills. A few minutes into the hills, and the sticky sweet aroma of ripe mangoes wafted up our noses. As we walked deeper along a narrow path, the great, gentle giants bearing these mangoes were visible, and the aroma of mangoes now filled the jungle! I had never seen an entire forest on a mango harvest before, and it was thrilling for a mango lover like myself!

A place in the hills

The Niyamgiri hills in the Rayagada and Kalahandi districts of the eastern state of Odisha are home to a small community called the Dongria Kondh. Small, because only about 8,000 people belong to this community, and they are called 'Dongria' by others around them because they live in the dongars or mountains. My colleagues and I were travelling there to meet an elder in the community.

We had heard that the Dongria Kondh place great spiritual importance in the mango tree. They associate a mango tree with purity. As we passed a few villages on our way to meet him, we were greeted by sights of mangoes and mango trees being used in various ways by the Dongria Kondh community. Just a few minutes after we began walking, we heard the beat of drums coming from one of the villages. We decided to invite ourselves to the festivities. Once at the village, we were greeted by a merry sight — a marriage was under way and the bride, from the neighbouring village uphill was supposed to be coming to the groom's village! A stream lay between the two villages where many *pujaris* from the community were gathered and performing a little ceremony beneath a giant mango tree! They were asking the spirits that they believe stay among the mango trees to bless the couple.

A little further away at another village, we saw all the components of a mango fruit being used for preparing various edible items that the community consumes and sells to earn a living. Ripe mango skins were being dried over rooftops of houses to be used in pickles; mango pulp was being extracted and dried, layer upon layer to make *aam papad*.

The domesticated animals of the Dongria Kondh are also fond of mangoes! We saw many goats eating the mangoes and when we went to the hills again in winter, domesticated pigs were still feasting on mango kernels on the periphery of the villages! We learnt that the community holds a special ceremony before beginning the mango harvest to ensure that there is a plentiful harvest.

They also worship the flowering mango tree and there is a strong reason for this. The Dongria Kondh are an agricultural forest community. They practise shifting cultivation in which a patch of the forest is cleared, the undergrowth burned and then cultivated for a few years. After a few years, another patch of the forest is cleared and the previous patch is allowed to regenerate for several years. Thus, patches are cleared and used in a continuous cycle, ensuring forest regeneration in the unused patches and availability of enough forest produce. This kind of agriculture allows the Dongria Kondh to grow a variety of millets, grains and pulses in the fields which provide them sustenance throughout the year. They believe that if the winds blow away the flowers on the mango tree, the harvest will also be affected.

Even when the Dongria Kondh clear a patch of forests, they avoid cutting trees with canopy covers like the mango tree. They understand that such trees protect the forests and provide enough shade and sustenance and hold the soil on the hill slopes. They hold a deep understanding of the forests and the trees because the forest is their home and also provides them with plenty of food and water.

The experience of the mango season of the Niyamgiri hills and the Dongria Kondh, who call it their home taught me the importance of such trees in the lives of these communities. For them, the trees are not only special for the mangoes they provide, but also for the life-giving nature of such trees to the entire forest ecosystem. We have much to learn from such communities.

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