

Tale of two villages: a brief case history of *Ghotia* and *Dokaranala*
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Dokaranala

Unlike several other villages that dot the Indian landscape Dokaranala does not have a protracted history to its account. But nevertheless it is a compact, rich and intense one, speaking in large proportions of the strife of one of the most marginalized communities in the region. The community in question are the Pardhis. They are such a minority that even the state administration has been reluctant to acknowledge their presence. To make things worse the Pardhis have been a nomadic, wandering and peripatetic community. This aspect of their livelihoods frequently hassled the colonial administration, particularly the forest department, and rather unfortunately the Pardhis have continued to suffer a similar fate in Independent India.

Thus, when in 2003 a group of Pardhis were shunted by the forest administration from a nearby locality they came and temporarily set base in the precincts of what we today know as Dokaranala. For a change the conditions favored the Pardhis over here, and under the influence of a few accommodating villagers, the Pardhis decided to opt for a more sedentary lifestyle. They exchanged their nomadic existence for settled agriculture for the first time and witnessed a prosperity, relatively speaking, that was hitherto unknown to them. But unfortunately this was not meant to last for too long. The idyll of village life was rudely disrupted in 2008 when a few villagers from a neighboring area began to insist for the Pardhis to move out of the region. The Pardhis were confused as to what had spurred this sudden hostility towards their presence, especially since they had not encroached any private property. In so far they had subsisted on measly and small clearings made on jungle lands. Thanks to Parivartan they were also aware of the right over the land they had been cultivating, primarily on account of a progressive policy enactment titled the Forest Rights Act of 2006. The above act ensures permanent ownership of all lands to tribal communities on the sole condition that it was under cultivation till or before 2005.

Notwithstanding, the local pressure kept mounting and in the later part of 2008 nearly a thousand villagers from the neighboring regions descended upon the Dohranala. They ordered the immediate evacuation of the area, and when the Pardhis declined they took matters into their own hands. Huts were broken, utensils were smashed, cattle was seized, and what's worse, crops awaiting harvest were set ablaze. The Pardhis receded into the neighboring forests, afraid for their lives. One of the Pardhis, Birju Ram, remembers clearly how the women and children huddled around one another when the villagers unleashed terror upon them. Fortunately one of the Pardhis managed to communicate with the activists of Parivartan using a mobile phone. Aganoo Ram Sahoo and other activists immediately arrived at the spot, bringing along with them police assistance and media persons. The mob was immediately dispelled, and a case was lodged in the concerned police station. After initial efforts to pacify the Pardhis and reestablish their livelihoods, Parivartan initiated a second round of community mobilization. This saw the Pardhis tapping into deep reserves of internal strength and courage. At a critical moment they decide to wage their war

themselves. The Pardhis who had in so far conducted their lives in a manner most reclusive stormed the local administration demanding speedy redressal of their problems. They pressured the local administration to act against the perpetrators. Eventually the local administration succumbed and a meeting was called involving all the concerned parties. In the meeting it became apparent that the villagers who had attacked the residence of the Pardhis had been instigated by the forest administration. The foresters had supposedly told the villagers that the Pardhis were a destructive and nomadic tribe who would destroy the forest produce on which the remaining villagers had a legitimate right for the sole fact that they were the 'original inhabitants' of the region. The base fact that the Pardhis had an equally long presence in the region was emasculated by the foresters.

As a result of all this and more action was initiated against a couple of the forest department officials. Circulars were issued in the interest of the Pardhis. The Pardhis and the local villagers have struck a good relationship of mutual respect over the years now, and buried the differences that had been spawned among them by the forest department. However, this should not be construed as the end of a struggle but a milestone. The forest department is yet to recognize (regularize, as it is commonly said) the land holdings of the Pardhis, and the strife for the same continues till date. But one can say with some guarantee that now the advantage rests with the Pardhis of Dokaranala, simply for the fact that they have found strength in their numbers, they are unrelentingly aware of their rights, and enjoy the support of the local village institutions such as the Panchayat.

Ghotiya

Ghotiya village falls under the Navgaon Panchayat. Some of the residents such as Bhagwan Singh and Negi Ram speak of how the community had tired in the past, because neither the land owning farmers nor the forest department liked their presence. The land owners would continuously ask them to move away from their lands and set their residence closer to the forests; while the forest department would continuously ask them to vacate the forest premises and settle somewhere closer to the villages. The community was stigmatized as being nomadic and thus unreliable from both ends of the fence. In the late 1960s a small group of Pardhis grew weary and began to look out for a small patch of land where they could nestle themselves and conduct their lives without any interference from the rest of society. Ghotiya offered the refuge they were looking for. Being surrounded by dense forests on all sides, it was solitary, isolated, and beyond the reach of many. But in post independence India vigorous campaigns were launched for enhancing our food security. Lands were allocated to already prosperous farmers. This colossal land grab brought the hitherto land owning communities once again into contact with the Pardhis. The interaction was not a peaceful one. Even other tribal groups resented the presence of the Pardhis. The priestly class in the neighboring villages associated a certain degree of wretchedness with them. In the early part of 1980 the first efforts were made to dislodge the community from the region.

Ratneshwar Nath, the founding member of Parivartan, intervened at this critical moment. He is fondly remembered for having engineered many of the social uprisings of the Pardhis in the

early part of the 1980s. Bhagwan Singh shares as to how they had never dared to step into a police station, but with the mentoring of Nath not only did they step into the police station they also learnt how to engage with the system and make it work to their own advantage. However, it was not easy to win the acceptance of the local villagers. The animosity of the local villagers against the Pardis was partly economic and partly cultural. In economic terms the surrounding villages felt that they were losing vital resources to an itinerant community. In cultural terms the selfsame villagers felt that the Pardis were uncivilized, wretched and primitive. The irony is that several of the surrounding villages are also tribal in nature. Till date the Pardis of Ghotiya do not know as to why fellow tribesmen of the region have treated them as lesser mortals. After nearly a longstanding feud of nearly a decade with the local administration and surrounding villagers the Pardis of Ghotiya in 1992 were finally able to gain rights over the lands they had been cultivating against all odds. Their crops had frequently been burnt but they never gave up. This was indeed a remarkable accomplishment since at the time the policy environment was not as favorable as it is today. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 which guarantees tenurial arrangements with comparative ease today was not even in the making in the 1990s.

The Pardhis of Ghotiya feel that they are now living in far better times. Negi Ram states that there was a time when they did not even have clothes to wear, they roamed the forests naked, exposed to every conceivable danger. Their children died of malaria and other diseases. Today they have shelter over their head, and the children go to a all-Pardhi school in the vicinity. The Pardhis also participate more actively in the flagship programs of the government such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). As per the NREGS state governments are required to ensure 100 days of manual labor to every rural household, with the objective of building and creating rural infrastructure. The tasks to be undertaken as part of NREGS are in itself required to be decided through local village level planning, in which also the Pardhis of Ghotiya have played an important role. Some of the Pardis of Ghotiya also feel proud of the fact that their labor is valued nowadays such that even the surrounding villagers seek their assistance in agricultural activities when they fall short of hands. But despite this seeming integration in the local political economy, several Pardhis still feel culturally disassociated. They are not taken seriously in decision making processes, particularly those pertaining to the religious sentiments and beliefs. Some of the Pardhis feel the reasons for this ostracism could be the handiwork of the priestly class, who are invariably non-tribal in nature but embedded within tribal society.

But perhaps even this is gradually changing. Many of the villagers from surrounding villages at times come to Negi Ram seeking a cure for their ill health and diseases. Negi Ram is a reservoir of traditional cures. His understanding and knowledge of indigenous medicine is encyclopedic. Besides the Pardhis of Ghotiya have made their presence felt in the region. They have demonstrated by way of their efforts that they are a force to reckon with. In order to eke out a life of dignity they are willing to approach the police, engage the lawyers, and awaken a slumbering administration with their petitions and protests.