

Grain banks rescue tribals from rain, exploitation

Hrusikesh Mohanty / Berhampur July 09, 2007

SAVING FOR RAINY DAY: The tribals of Koraput district of Orissa are now able to do without borrowing from money lenders.

Like her fellow tribals, Bati Jani of Puki village in Orissa's Koraput district is unfazed by the onset of monsoon. When several other tribal families are taking loans from the middlemen to maintain their family, 42-year-old Bati has not approached the landlord for the last three years.

Instead, she is taking a loan of grain from the grain bank in her village with a nominal grain interest to maintain her seven-member family.

"Three years ago, we were forced to borrow from the money lender to maintain our family during the rains. The grain that we used to produce went into paying the money lender," she said.

But those days are past for the hundreds of tribals of Koraput district. "We have developed our grain bank with contribution from the villagers and with support of South Orissa Voluntary Action (SOVA), one of the leading NGOs in the district," says Gopa Jani, the president of the village committee of Puki.

For setting up the grain bank, each and every household in the village contributed food grain, including paddy and maize. In addition, SOVA contributed an equal quantity to make it a corpus fund of food grain. The grain was stocked in the traditional way in bamboo baskets to protect from insects and managed by a village committee.

"A borrower has to pay an interest of two kg and one kg for 10 kg of maize and paddy, respectively," says Jani. The loan is repaid by the borrower after harvesting. Puki village has 69 households with a population of 244, and no one now approaches the money lenders for loans, he said.

"The grain bank helps a lot during the lean period from July to September, when we do not get any work," says Arjuna Mallick of Chemiaguda village in Badakerenda panchayat.

In his village, with 22 households, mostly Kandha tribals, people borrow grain mostly in the rains.

Since last three years, grain banks have been setup in 18 villages in three panchayats of two blocks including Koraput and Kunduru.

"About 928 households of these villages have benefited from the grain banks," Sanjeet Patnaik, president, SOVA, said. "We are trying to setup more grain banks in coming years," he added.

The tribal people in Koraput, generally practice podu (shifting cultivation) and collect minor forest produces. Koraput has about 50 per cent tribal population.

