Still, **I Rise**

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The title of this book comes from Maya Angelou's poem of the same name.

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Dear Reader,

Still, I Rise is a celebration of Samvaad, a homage to its conviction that indigenous peoples and their collective wisdom may lead humanity into a truly sustainable and equitable future.

Samvaad, since 2014, has emerged as an ecosystem that ties together tribes of India and beyond for constructive dialogue. It has already brought more than 30,000 people from 157 tribes across 25 states and five Union Territories of India, and 17 countries, into impartial contemplation of indigenous narratives.

Samvaad has three key pillars. The first of these is the pan-India, and now international, annual conclave and its year-round regional editions. It provides a platform where movements, campaigns and collaborations converge for action-oriented conversations.

The second is indigenous cultures and life systems. It encompasses health and medicine, music and dance, languages and literature, arts and crafts, and knowledge systems. Indigenous communities have great storytellers; storytelling is inherent to their way of life. To energise the documentations, Samvaad initiatives use tools such as cinema and music. One ongoing project is the Rhythms of the Earth — a contemporary jam between tribal musicians and vocalists across India. The other is the Samvaad fellowship — an action research collective.

The third — the Tribal Leadership Programme (TLP) — is critical. Established in 2017, the TLP has created a fellowship of 279 young leaders, representing 112 tribes from 24 states and Union Territories. From land, water and forest rights protectors; to political activists; to entrepreneurs; to art, culture and language preservationists; to ideators and implementers of community-based livelihoods; to rejuvenators of indigenous farming, medicine, and healthcare — they are emerging as a dynamic and inspiring force.

Still, I Rise is a showcase of Samvaad's energy, power, and futurism, and the people who share it.

Sourav Roy
CEO, Tata Steel Foundation

Contents

476 million people. 90 countries.
5,000 distinct identity groups.
They are not even 5 percent of the planet's
population, yet they protect 80 percent of
its biodiversity.

Broken Wings and Rising Phoenix

Deepa Adhikari | From the Editor's Desk

Reading Narayan Sanyal's demi-travelogue Dandak Shabari on the lives of the adivasis (indigenous or tribal people), who live in the forest-hills of present-day Bastar[1], I was moved by his choice of title. The author wrote the book as a tribute to Shabari, a minor character in the ancient Indian epic Ramayan. Ramayan was composed by Maharishi Valmiki, who pioneered Sanskrit poetry. At a critical point in the plot, Valmiki brings his protagonist Ram to the Dandakaranya forest — the abode of the demon ruler Dandak. Suddenly, the story slows down into the life of adivasi Shabari — an old, frail devotee of Ram. It has intrigued historians and littérateurs alike as to why Valmiki changes his trajectory for a sub-plot that has no bearing either on the story or its advancement. Was it because Valmiki's own parents were adivasis?[2] Was it because he wanted to establish the dissimilitude of the forest people? All we know is Valmiki seems unable to move on till he completes the story of Shabari and her 'sacred forest'[3].

Going back to Sanyal, in the late 1950s he went to the very same forest. He was a civil engineer with the Dandakaranya Project, which was started by the Indian government to settle displaced Bengali refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Many parts of the forest had been thrown open to bulldozers. The tribes who the government half-heartedly wanted to co-opt, had moved deeper into the woods, overwhelmed by the demonic constructions. Their voices were never heard and their opinions were never sought for the use of the ecology that had been their home for centuries. Sanyal's heart went out. The more he interacted with the Maria, Muria, Bhatra, Koya and Bondo tribes, the more he wished he could live the way they did — in simplicity, untouched by greed, in unison with the forest.

For artists, scientists, mystics and explorers, the indigenous people's worlds hold a haunting attraction. They are where Nature flows unfettered, at its mightiest. Even today. From the mostly snowed-in Gurez Valley in Kashmir where the Dard Shins live, to the Andaman Islands of the bow and arrow-wielding Jarawas, to the Chenchus of the Nallamala tiger reserve in Andhra Pradesh, to the Khasis of the sacred groves of Meghalaya. This holds true despite the ever-growing cacophony of bulldozers — of mines, irrigation projects, expressways, power plants, and heavy industries.

Many indigenous peoples live in voluntary isolation without sustained communication with anybody outside their habitats. In 2019, at Samvaad, I met the Dongria Kondhs of the Niyamgiri hill range in south Odisha. Women of varying ages, wearing white and red sarees, the traditional shawls — kapdaganda — loosely draped over shoulders, they sat in a corner, keeping to themselves, unresponsive to people who wanted selfies. Their bodies were covered in intricate tattoos. Rings hung in tiny bunches from the multiple piercings in their noses and ears. Neck bands and beads almost completely covered their necks. Coloured hair pins were scattered like flowers on their heads; their tightly-coiled side-buns held by wooden combs. After five days of stilted interactions in signs and gestures, in which they seemed disinterested at best, they chose to speak. A woman turned fiercely and said, "We live in our forest villages. Many of us only take salt from the outside world. They are trying to take our homeland away for industries. Where will we go? We don't know how to live anywhere else. We have nothing except our land, forest god and mountain god. Why should we leave?" Her voice evinced belligerence and confusion in equal measure.

Most tribes in India (or anywhere else) are not so isolated, nor do they want to be. Is every indigenous person a Nature-loving seeker of the idyllic? There is no such thing.

Let us, right away, be done with the controversial 'creamy layer' — indigenous families or communities who have accrued power, education, and money over time. They mostly live in peri-urban to urban settings and enjoy the lion's share of Scheduled Tribe (ST)[4] reservations[5]. In an ideal world, they would surrender their ST certificates and afford others the opportunity.

Much like any other peoples, arguably every five miles, indigenous identity and aspiration changes. Especially in central and western India, the largest tribes live in villages that have merged with the mainstream world. Life does not go on without mobile phones. They farm. They rear animals. They work. They migrate to cities seasonally. Many of them, supported by non-governmental organisations, government schemes, and progressive bureaucrats run community-based businesses related to non-timber forest produce, traditional foodgrains, agricultural supply chain, culture-based crafts, and scientifically-validated traditional medicines. They are like any other rural community who have distinct foods, gods, and culture.

Until, music. In the beats of the dance, in the movement of their synchronised feet, in the tapering wail of their songs, you can hear the ancient otherness.

Until, dissonance. In whispers, fears, satires, protests, pleas, COPs (Conference of the Parties — UNFCCC), and each new iteration of Davos, they ask existential questions. What is development? What is this limitless consumerism? Why are we destroying what is not broken? When do we say enough?

The Dongaria Kondhs of southern Odisha live in the remote slopes of the Niyamgiri hill range.

India's landmark Forest Rights Act of 2006 vests in forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and communities the right to its forests — both in terms of habitation and resources. It goes on to acknowledge, "...the forest rights on ancestral lands and their habitat were not adequately recognised in the consolidation of State forests during the colonial period as well as in independent India resulting in historical injustice to the forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem... it has become necessary to address the long standing insecurity of tenurial and access rights of forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers including those who were forced to relocate their dwelling due to State development interventions." In just 50 years, between 1961 and 2011, 84,00,000 indigenous peoples have been displaced by projects. The figures have not been updated reliably in the last ten years, but the headlines reveal, as does satellite data, that a startling number of ongoing projects were once forests.

In our dominant consciousness, there are no conversations about the discharge of historical debt to the tribes. I am often asked the name of the 'tribe of India', how dangerous they are, how they live, and whether they are anti-development — 'We always see them protesting'. The 'woke' are more aggressive: 'Reservations for tribes are robbing us' — the assumption being that the minuscule 'creamy layer' is a representative projection.

John Corowa of the Bundjalung Nation in Australia is a musician and indigenous health specialist. He lives in Brisbane. Talking about the First People of Australia, he was in tears. The White Man, he said, deemed them savages and treated them worse. Their homes were encroached, their children were taken away and put in residential schools to be 'civilised', their identity and culture were systemically broken, and they were led into drugs, alcohol, and cheap labour. Canadian musician Kathia Rock of the Innu people too spoke about the hundreds of indigenous women who have been found murdered, or gone missing never to be found again. This runs close to Corowa's narrative — how forced generational poverty, residential schools, systemic violence, and high unemployment unravel. The North American narrative is worse — a horrifying history of subjugation and genocide.

After decades of injustice, countered by activism and movements of assertion, many heads of states have tendered unequivocal apologies, promising to make amends. But the more things change, the more they remain the same. Countries are adopting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but what good are they when countered by equally powerful legislations on extractive investments?

Sovereign peoples, who lived self-sufficiently on the mineral-rich lands — with powerful knowledge systems, who were mighty enough to take on colonial armies and mount battles of self-assertion, and wise enough to protect biodiversity scientifically for centuries, have become the poorest and most vulnerable populations.

The global Multidimensional Poverty Index (2021), produced by the United Nations Development Programme and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, finds that "In India, five out of six multidimensionally poor people are from lower tribes or castes. The Scheduled Tribe group accounts for 9.4 percent of the population and is the poorest, with 65 million of the 129 million people living in multidimensional poverty." Globally, Amnesty International says, one-third of the world's 900 million extremely poor rural people are indigenous, suffering very high rates of landlessness, malnutrition, and internal displacement compared to other groups.

Jacinta Kerketta is quiet and unassuming. A lanky young woman with short hair. But, you cannot miss the incandescence of her eyes. Or the determination of her jawline. Hailing from the Oraon tribe of Jharkhand, she has emerged as an important poetic and journalistic voice, both in India and overseas. She takes on the discourse with piercing directness in her poem that follows.

John Corowa at Samvaad 2017

Jacinta Kerketta at the first Samvaad Tribal Leadership Programme in 2017

River, Mountain, and Market[6]

Little Posterity ran on — we're here at the bazaar!
What would you like to buy, the shopkeeper asked.
Brother, a little rain, a handful wet earth, a bottle of river, and that mountain preserved.
There, hanging on that wall, a piece of Nature as well.
And why is the rain so dear, pray tell?
The shopkeeper said — this wetness is not of here!
It comes from another sphere.
Times are slack, have ordered just a sack.

Fumbling for money in the corner of my sari,
I untied the knot only to see
In place of a few folded rupees
The crumpled folds of my entire being.

Data is impersonal, but it can speak volumes. 476 million people. 90 countries. 5,000 distinct identity groups. They are not even five percent of the planet's population, yet they protect 80 percent of its biodiversity. Indigenous people are more effective guardians of this planet than any designed conservation efforts. The farther they live from the market economy, the stronger their part of the Earth stands in its natural glory. While stock exchanges don't fluctuate when a species dies out, a river dries up, or a commercial farm overproduces hybrids, we know now that these disparate events are impacting climate at an almost irreversible rate of change. The loss of forests and habitats which store vast reserves of carbon, the use of fossil fuels, and the subsequent damage to our ecosphere are forcing countries to reconsider their appetite for development.

Every global caucus has studies, data, and economic assessments that prove beyond a shadow of doubt that, "One of the biggest opportunities to catalyse transformative changes from local to global levels is to support indigenous peoples and local communities to secure their human rights in general and particularly their rights to self-determined governance systems, cultures and collective lands and territories. Although there are no panaceas, this is arguably a key 'missing link' in efforts to address the biodiversity and climate crises that would also contribute to social justice and sustainable development priorities." (Territories of Life: 2021 Report).

Siham Drissi, Biodiversity and Land Management Programme Officer with the United Nations Environment Programme, is undeviating, "We absolutely need to protect, preserve and promote the traditional knowledge, customary sustainable use and expertise of indigenous communities if we want to halt the damage we're doing — and ultimately save ourselves."

On November 20, 2019, when Tata Steel Foundation head Sourav Roy called to discuss the germ of this book, we met at a tea shop in Jamshedpur. The sixth edition of Samvaad had concluded the night before. Sitting by the grimy picture window, we saw a group of women participants, in their early 20s, waiting at the bus stop to get their rides home. We recognised a few. As nondescript as they may have appeared in the mid-afternoon dust and din of a city centre, we had heard them hold a large audience with their change stories; they were powerhouses. We knew then, we would begin by identifying the most compelling young voices of the thousands-strong fellowship of Samvaad; we wouldn't document their stories — they would be the authors of their own pieces. There are non-indigenous writers featured in the book too; when we have chosen the same road, there is strength in walking together.

Still, I Rise has emerged as an assemblage of voices, aligned both fortuitously and purposively, as they build alternatives to avert the cataclysmic race to the bottom. They are changemakers who will not give up on a more humane and replenished planet. They are recreating lost ways, and seeking recovery of pillaged Earth. Leaders. Pioneers. Conservationists. Digital disruptors. Researchers. Poets. Human igniters of change.

I hear the drums. I see the dreams rise. I recall an excerpt of a poem by trailblazing Australian aboriginal poet and activist Ooderoo Noonuccal — her words befitting expression of a collective longing:

A Song of Hope

Look up, my people,
The dawn is breaking,
The world is waking
To a new bright day,
When none defame us,
No restriction tame us,
Nor colour shame us,
Nor sneer dismay...

So long we waited
Bound and frustrated,
Till hate be hated
And caste deposed;
Now light shall guide us,
No goal denied us,
And all doors open
That long were closed.

See plain the promise,
Dark freedom-lover!
Night's nearly over,
And though long the climb,
New rights will greet us,
New mateship meet us,
And joy complete us
In our new Dream Time.

To our fathers' fathers
The pain, the sorrow;
To our children's children
The glad tomorrow.

References

1. Bastar is a district in the state of Chhattisgarh in central India. Over 70 percent of its population is indigenous.
2. Tribal Roots of Hinduism by Dr. Shiv Kumar Tiwari, Page 269.
3. Aranya Kanda: Rama Visits Shabari — in English translation of the Valmiki Ramayan by Hari Prasad Shastri, Chapter 74.
4. Scheduled Tribes are classified communities of India who have been historically marginalised on the basis of geographical isolation. They are recognised as indigenous peoples as per global and constitutional parameters.
5. Reservations in India is a system of affirmative action that provides historically disadvantaged groups reserved access to seats in government jobs, educational institutions, welfare schemes, and legislatures. It is a government policy, backed by the Indian Constitution.
6. The original poem, in Hindi language, was published in a poetry collection called Angor, published by Adivaani, Kolkata, in 2016. It was translated into English by Bhumika Chawla-d'Souza.

A development communication expert for rural projects, and a social campaigns specialist, Deepa Adhikari executes her work via her entrepreneurial venture — Pipilika.

A post-graduate in English literature and language from the University of Hyderabad, Adhikari has spent 15 years in print journalism and national broadcast newsrooms. In her last engagement, she was with NDTV as a national news editor, and created award-winning documentation on social justice (New York Festivals and the Commonwealth Broadcasting Awards). She simultaneously helped build, in an editorial capacity, a robust social campaigns vertical that focused on education, environment, healthcare and livelihoods. She has a special place in her heart for a series called Every Life Matters funded by the Gates Foundation. She co-created it with a brilliant reporting team, using the methodology of community-led solutions journalism; it resulted in impactful governmental interventions.

Pipilika's work is focused on indigenous and farming communities and has touchpoints in 14 states.

Learning from the communities she has worked with, she believes that sustainable and non-partisan progress is possible if all verticals of planning have at its core compassion and conversation.


In the Feminine **Vein**

The Rise of the Amazons

Daniela Yepá and Professor Juliana Sangion

We are many, we are multiple, we are a thousand women, caciques, midwives, witchdoctors, shamans, farmers, teachers, lawyers, nurses, and doctors in the multiple sciences of the Territory and the university. We are anthropologists, parliamentarians, and psychologists. We are many, moving from the ground of the village to the ground of the world.

Excerpt from the Manifesto of the Indigenous Women's March (2021), National Articulation of Indigenous Women Warriors of Ancestrality

Daniela

I grew up surrounded by women warriors — some of them in stories, some in newspapers and on television, and one right in my backyard, rather I in her. Carmenza Villegas. My mother.

Carmenza, a Barasana woman of the Tucano people, was born and brought up in an indigenous aldeias (village) in the Amazonas state of Brazil. At an early age, she learned to make traditional medicines. She has eight children; I am the eldest, in my late 20s, and the youngest is a six-month-old boy. Though we lived for a long time in Mitú, a busy city in neighbouring Colombia where my father worked, we were brought up traditionally. My father belongs to the Yepá Masha ethnic group of the Tucanos.

My mother helped my father put the eldest four kids through school and college by farming and selling traditional foods — beiju (tapioca crepes), maçoca (flour of white manioc or cassava), chillies, and fruits. Even today she sells farm produce from home. She taught us to be gentle with Nature, keep in touch with friends, family, even customers, and never give up on our dreams or our roots; they anchor us to where we came from and who we are. I want to bring up my child, who is in my womb as I write this, the same way.

During summer vacations, we visited our maternal grandmother. We took canoes across Papuri river to reach her aldeias. The banks would be crowded with families and children. We loved to spend the days playing, fishing, and eating fruits. My grandmother and mother would wake us really early to help cook beiju and quinhapira (fish with broth). Then we went to the river, bathed and ate, and by 6 am took a canoe to the countryside. There would be a pan of flour to drink with xibé — a natural beer — for when it got a little hot.

I loved the weekends the most because we spent them at the main maloca (community space). All the families brought food for a common meal. The tables were laden with a variety of porridges made of banana, flours, and cubiu (a variety of wild tomatoes), quinhapiras, beijus, and drinks made of fruits. The food was placed on the table in the centre of the maloca. The women and children stood to its left and men on the right. The women served the elders first. Then the rest of us ate together. When the holidays would end, I would be sad to leave. Back in Mitú, sometimes when I ate fish or fruit, or helped my mother cook a traditional dish, my heart would be heavy with memories.

I am made of an ancient way of life. I am made of memories and affection of my people. I am made of trust in the land I come from.

Professor Juliana Sangion of the Department of Communications at the State University of Campinas in São Paulo is like a second mother to me. I would be lost if she hadn't held my hand when I came to study. I thank my mothers, one who has kept me anchored to my roots, and the other who has taught me to be culturally assertive even when I have to adapt to newer worlds.

Juliana

In the mid-1970s, I was born in Campinas, the second largest city in the state of São Paulo. As the eldest daughter of a teacher mother and a political activist father (who loved books), I was encouraged to study and learn about different cultures. I was 25 when I got a scholarship for a postgraduate degree in Barcelona, Spain. The impending departure made me want to understand my country for the first time. Up until then, like many Brazilians, I knew about indigenous peoples only from books and newspapers. There is no real interaction between the two worlds. I would even go so far as to say that most Brazilians spend their entire lives without knowing anything in depth about its indigenous citizens. They are very few in numbers — less than 1 percent of the population. Most live in Amazonas and Roraima states, in the 690 government-recognised indigenous territories, in and around forests. There are many small tribes who choose to have no contact with the outside world.

While in school, I had become friends with a tribal girl during the Indigenous Day celebrations. For these programmes, schools invite indigenous persons to talk to the children about their lives, but often it comes across as superficial because the schools position them as characters rather than real people.

In 2018, as a member of the admissions commission at the university, I was taking care of outreach and selections in the Amazonas. The university recognises the historical debt Brazilian society must discharge to its indigenous population, and wanted to be proactive about it. Brazil

Encontro das Águas — Portuguese for the Meeting of Rivers. This is the confluence of the dark waters of Rio Negro and the muddy Solimões river near Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state. Both the rivers flow alongside for almost six kilometres without losing their character. The two merge to form Rio Amazonas, or the Amazon river.

currently has 75,000 indigenous students in universities. If you look at the 2007 figures, there were only 7,000.

As a journalist, I wanted to capture the journey in a documentary. As I began to contact students via email, Daniela caught my attention. She told me that she wanted to be a journalist, and was going to apply for the Communications programme. I invited her to be part of the documentary. When I reached the Amazonas, I crossed the majestic river of Rio Negro and its tributaries, incomparable in scale to any river I have seen in any country. The forests are humongous, deep, and impregnable in parts. The trees stand unbelievably tall. Transport is exclusively fluvial; rivers are the roads of the Amazonas. People live in direct contact with Nature and subsist on forest produce. I found they are not extractive in approach; they genuinely respect and care for natural resources.

The young people are not so different from anywhere else. They love their phones and gadgets, hanging with friends, and discussing trending topics. They use WhatsApp, make reels, post films. Yet, they are unique in the deep way they have a relationship with their roots.

I met Daniela's family and was able to spend time with them. A few months later, she got selected and came to live in our home on campus.

Daniela

As an indigenous daughter of the Brazilian Amazon, I know how important it is to tell you about our struggle. 2.7 million or nine percent of the population of the Amazon Rainforest[1] — the world's largest forest-river ecosystem — is indigenous. We are 350 different ethnic groups (about 60 remain voluntarily isolated). An undisturbed part of the life system, guarding and being guarded by the forest for centuries, now we have become part of the crisis.

Agribusiness-led forest fires are at an all-time high; there are tens of thousands of them burning. A forest mass, some say as big as the country of Belgium, is gone. Commercial ranching, logging and mining are going on at a brutal pace; much of it is downright illegal. Environmental agencies have lost funding. Anti-indigenous policies that have been pushed are nothing short of barbaric. Brazil has emerged as the most dangerous place to be an environmental journalist or activist — at least 20 were killed in 2021 alone.

In her mid-20s, Txai Suruí leads the Rondônia Indigenous Youth Movement. She has produced the award-winning documentary, The Territory, about her childhood friend Ari Uru-eu-wau-wau, who was murdered trying to save the forests. Her words at the opening of the United Nations Glasgow COP26 Climate Summit, speak to me: "I am only 24, but my people have been living in the Amazon Forest for at least 6,000 years. My father, the Great Chief Almir Surui, taught me that we must listen to the stars, the moon, the wind, the animals, and the trees. Today the climate is warming. The animals are disappearing. The rivers are dying, and our plants don't flower like they did before. The Earth is speaking. She tells us that we have no more time! Indigenous people are on the frontline of the climate emergency, and we must be at the centre of the decisions happening here... Let us end the pollution of hollow words. Let us fight for a liveable future and present... It is always necessary to believe this dream is possible."

The Brazilian Amazon is the source of six percent of the world's oxygen. It is also the biggest carbon sink of the planet; it captures planet-warming carbon dioxide within its living trees. Burning of the rainforest is releasing that stored carbon into the atmosphere. When questioned, recently-replaced president Jair Bolsonaro, who lost the elections in October of 2022, famously asked the global community to shut up. One of his tweets went: "None of those who are attacking us have the right. If they wanted a pretty forest to call their own, they should have preserved the ones in their countries." He has been, arguably, one of the most detrimental leaders in our democratic history. At the time of going into print, his most fanatical supporters, who he has empowered over the years in consonance with his far-right agenda — groups linked to evangelism and agribusinesses — have been occupying major roads across the country. They claim the elections were fraudulently won, and have been demanding that the results be overturned.

Analysing the results, Climate Observatory, a network of Brazilian civil society organisations advocating for climate action, has found that Novo Progresso, in southern Pará, where Bolsonaro received 82.92 per cent of the votes in the October 30, 2022 runoff, Lula got 17.08%. A Mongabay report by André Schröder says, "The locality was the epicentre of what became known worldwide as the "day of the fire", a coordinated action by ranchers, loggers and land-grabbers to clear illegally deforested land — which resulted in record-breaking wildfires in August 2019.

"In neighbouring Itaituba, also in southern Pará, Bolsonaro had 62.45% of the votes in the second round. This municipality has concentrated on illegal gold mining operations... The president won the first round in the vast majority of the 256 municipalities of the Arc of Deforestation — a region on the eastern and southern edges of the Amazon rainforest that has topped the forest loss rates in the last decades. Placed on the margins of the Belém-Brasília and Cuiabá-Porto Velho highways, these 256 municipalities are responsible for around 75% of deforestation in the Amazon.

"Historical, economic, social and even religious elements explain the massive voting for Bolsonaro in the Arc of Deforestation. These municipalities were created in the 1970s when settlers went to the Amazon as part of a federal occupation policy of the military dictatorship, which ran from 1964 to 1985. The population came from other parts of Brazil, especially from the agricultural states of the southern region, and was encouraged by the military dictatorship to cut down the forest to open up areas for farming and ranching. They don't have a connection with the forest, with the rivers and with the culture of the Amazon region."

We are persecuted and massacred. Our bodies are raped, our villages invaded, our forests looted. Since they won't stop, we have been forced to rise. In Greek mythology, the Amazons are a tribe of women warriors who are unbeatable in combat. A similar band of women have risen to fight for the Amazon.

Juliana

2019, when Unicamp welcomed its first batch of indigenous students, was also the year in which the First March of Indigenous Women took place in the federal capital Brasília. The students, including Daniela, participated in the march, and were able to briefly meet Joenia

Joenia Wapichana Photo: Facebook (2022)

Sonia Guajajara. Photo: UN Photo/Ariana Lindquist (2019)

Wapichana. It was an unforgettable moment because Wapichana is the first indigenous woman (and the second indigenous person) to be elected to the Parliament. She won in 2018 by a margin of 8,400 votes.

Wapichana is the first indigenous woman in Brazil to graduate in law, and argue a case in the Supreme Court. In 2004, she appeared before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, asking it to compel the Brazilian government to demarcate the Indigenous Territory of the Raposa Serra do Sol as a reserved area. It is threatened by extremely aggressive and disruptive commercial interests. In court, she argued the merit of keeping the territory reserved as a contiguous area, without fragmenting it to make concessions for the interested businesses. In 2009, the Supreme Court upheld Raposa Serra do Sol as an exclusive indigenous territory. This was a landmark victory. Her lifetime's work earned her the 2018 United Nations Human Rights Prize.

Bolsonaro's 2022 election promise to dereserve Raposa Serra do Sol cost Wapichana her re-election. But, in a historic feat, for the first time Brazil has two indigenous women parliamentarians — Sônia Guajajara and Célia Xakriabá.

Guajajara is dazzling. In 2018, she was the first indigenous person to appear on a presidential ticket; she contested the post of vice president. The following year she helped organise the First March of Indigenous Women, which brought together 2,000 women from different indigenous territories. The city shook with the energy of the march — chants, rituals, screams and colours. In her address, Guajajara thundered: "It's very important to be here in Brasilia to show the world that indigenous women are resisting attacks on our rights and the rollbacks of this government. We are staging our first women's march counting on the presence, visibility, strength, and spirituality of indigenous women."

As the executive coordinator of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, she has brought national and international attention to the violence and violations. Her decades of fierce fight for indigenous assertion has emboldened movements. When she takes the stage, the world listens. Sônia is an inspiration, not just for me, but for millions of Brazilians. The TIME magazine recognises her as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2022.

She came to our university during her election campaign and spoke about an integrated fora of indigenous candidates: A Call for the Earth. "When you compare the indigenous lands with the other protected areas, you see that the indigenous ones are the best-preserved. Does this happen because there is a protection policy? No. It's because the Indians are protecting them. If we were not there, they would destroy everything. We are a barrier against chaos."

Célia Xakriabá arrived majestically, in a flowing white dress and a huge headdress to participate in the largest meeting of indigenous students. She is younger than Guajajara in age and experience, but the fire in her eyes burns bright. Imagine the impact of this speech on a campus that has 35,000 students; only 350 are indigenous! "This is the time to say that we, indigenous peoples and indigenous women, are the diversity. We are midwives, healers, stylists, journalists, nurses, but we have not abandoned our tradition, and that is what makes Brazil stand."

Xakriabá decided to run for the elections because "we have an important commitment to stop global warming and to warm hearts. The day it ends for us indigenous peoples, it will also end for you and your children. We cannot sell the brightness of the sun, the brightness of the waters, and the wealth of the Earth. The Xakriabá walk with me, because I believe we carry our people inside us. We are a people that resists through the power of blossom."

Daniela

I work at Wayuri Indigenous Communicators Network. Here I met Elizângela Baré, who was a departmental head with the Federation of Indigenous Organisations of Rio Negro. In 2020, Elizângela had started a

Brazil has emerged as the most dangerous place to be an environmental journalist or activist — at least 20 were killed in 2021 alone.

very successful health campaign — Rio Negro, We Take Care. It ensured that medicines, and essentials reached all contactable indigenous settlements by way of the river.

Sumaúma is founded by Eliane Brum, a highly respected Brazilian writer, journalist and documentary filmmaker, along with celebrated British newsman Jonathan Watts. It is a unique digital journalistic platform named after one of the largest trees in the Amazon rainforest. Indigenous forest dwellers believe, during their constant exchange with non-human forest beings, the roots of the Sumaúma collect water, producing a sound that can be heard over long distances. Based in Altamira, along the tumultuous Xingu river in Pará state, the platform "tells stories that live here, in the Amazon. We also want to tell stories from other parts of the world, but in a different way — from the perspective of forest peoples, as well as the most rigorous science..."

"Our values can be summed up in two words: forest first. The forest — its nature and its people — must come before the market. This is an approach based on both cutting-edge climate science and traditional indigenous thinking. But there are powerful and violent threats to those who believe this from companies, politicians, and organised crime ...we will sink our roots into the ground and spread our limbs until we form a tree, as a trilingual digital newspaper... the platform will only grow like its namesake by working with forest journalists in a process of co-training, where we will teach local communicators the best of what we have learned and practised in journalism, some of us for more than thirty years, while young indigenous, beiradeiros (members of traditional Amazon forest communities), descendants of enslaved rebels known as quilombolas, small-hold farmers, and youth from the marginalised areas of Amazon cities will teach us how they tell stories. After all, Indigenous peoples have been transmitting their knowledge and producing news in the Amazon for at least 13,000 years."

In Manaus, the capital of Amazonas, Vanda Witoto, a nursing technician took on the government's neglect of the indigenous peoples. She fought and got an exclusive wing for indigenous patients at the Covid-19 hospital. Vanda and other women from her village brought traditional hammocks to replace the beds so that patients do not feel out of place. She and her group began to also make masks to close the deficit in supply. Her car was a veritable ambulance. In January 2021, she was the first indigenous person in the Amazonas to take the vaccine, to encourage those who were afraid. She came to the vaccination booth bare feet, in a long dress, with colourful feathers in her headdress, beads around her neck, and her face painted.

We — Juliana, I, and millions of our sisters across the world — respond to the call of our warrior sisters viscerally. It gives us the courage to paint ourselves too. May the future belong to our headdresses, maraca, genipap and annatto.

References

1. The Amazon Rainforest is a 1.4-billion-acre life zone, twice the size of India, that spans nine countries — Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana, an overseas territory of France. Home to more than 30 million people, the Amazon is unrivalled in scale and complexity. It is home to at least 10 percent of the world's known biodiversity — 1,300 bird species, 3,000 species of fish, and approximately 430 species of mammals. More than 2.5 million species of insect scuttle through the leaf litter alone.
2. Running through the complex and rich ecosystem is the Amazon river, matching the forest in expanse and intricacy. With more than 1,100 tributaries, 17 of which are over 930 miles (1,497 km) long, the river has the largest drainage system in the world; approximately one-fifth of all the water that runs on the Earth's surface is carried by it. In fact, it has greater volume and discharge than the next six largest rivers combined.
3. From the 1500s onwards, the Amazon has been a target of exploration, subjugation and extraction. However, centuries of interference are but a blip compared to the plunder that has taken place in the last 70-odd years caused by the government opening up the forests for agriculture, logging, ranching, mining, industry, transportation, military use, and energy development. To accelerate economic outcomes, projects were made tax-free and poor people from other parts of Brazil were given land to settle here and work, even as the original settlers were displaced by mining and power projects.

Professor Juliana Sangion is a Brazilian journalist, with a PhD in Multimedia and Cinema from the University of Campinas, in São Paulo. She teaches at the Communications and Audiovisual Department. Sangion is the director of the documentary Purãga Pesika (2019), about the indigenous students that came for the first time to the university. She is the coordinator of the podcast, Ecoa Maloca, a sound project on Spotify she runs with indigenous students.

Daniela Yepá is an indigenous woman of the Yepá Mahsã ethnic group of the Tucano people and is graduating in Literary Studies at the State University of Campinas, in São Paulo. She is a part of the Wayuri Network of Indigenous Communicators and has participated in coverage of events such as the Acampamento Terra Livre. She has also collaborated with Mongabay to report on the city of São Gabriel.

The Memory Keepers' Daughters

Dr. Meenakshi Munda

In my childhood, my paternal grandma Jingi Soy, who lived in Selda village in the present-day state of Jharkhand, came to visit us often in the capital city of Ranchi. We loved her food. She garnished salads by mashing in mustard leaves, chillies, and seasonal herbs growing in our kitchen garden. She added onions, garlic, tomato and salt, and then topped it off with mustard oil. The measurements of the ingredients were in the memory of her fingers. The taste still dances on my tongue. Foods I grew up with are memories. There are histories and cultures and civilisations living in them.

I am a woman of the Munda indigenous group, fiercely proud of my lineage. The emotion is not linked to material reasons. I come from a long line of grandmothers, mothers, sisters and aunts who are the uninterrupted keepers of knowledge systems, lores, spirituality, languages and sustainable resource-use practices. They are the inconspicuous guardians of forests, rivers, mountains and lands. They know how to hunt, fish, plant and graze animals without upsetting the ecosystem. They are indispensable in chhatthi (naming ceremony), tukui lutur (ear-piercing ceremony), aadandi (wedding), and diri chapi (last rites, which includes placing of the gravestone). This pride of place is secure despite the societal framework of our community being patrilineal.

Women have always been responsible for the households, fields and kitchen gardens. So, they forage for food and water, nutrition, firewood and medicinal plants in the hills and the woods. They don't kill or hunt birds during the breeding season. They don't touch trees and plants in pollination. They look for alternatives. They recognise the value of hundreds of forest produce, how to use or eat them. They know about herbs that heal burns, cuts, stomach ailments, headaches, fevers and complications after child births and abortions.

Naturally, our villages have self-sustained healthcare systems. Everyday ailments in humans or animals are treated easily. Even during the pandemic, the immunity and survivability of our people remained high. Women grow organic hyperlocal crops. So, Munda villages didn't suffer even when supplies were disrupted.

Herbs found in the forest are high quality in terms of mineral and vitamin content. Our women use 22 herbs to make ranu — a traditional rice beer. The herbs help in the fermentation; no chemical starter is used. They go to the forest and offer prayers to Buru Bonga — a Nature god. Only if Bonga is pleased, they believe, will they find the herbs. They even seek permission from the plant before plucking; the quantity is humble, only what they need. When they cut a tree to build a house, they leave the roots unharmed and protect the stump with a stone; tender twigs sprout in the stump and the tree begins again. You can see the symbiotic relationship in the thousands of songs in which Munda women and men have conversations with Nature.

Grandma Jingi was married to grandpa Bhaiya Ram Munda, a noted freedom fighter, political leader and educationist. They wanted a daughter, but only had sons. When I was born, their first granddaughter, both of them wept tears of joy. My grandfather prioritised women's education and encouraged many Munda girls to go to the best women's residential schools available back in the day. In 1948, India's first President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, founded the Adim Jati Sewa Mandal; my grandfather was its founder secretary. The organisation led to the setting up of 500 residential schools for tribal boys and girls in Jharkhand. He also wrote a beautiful collection of folktales, Dara Jama Kan Hodo Kaahani Ko, in 1961, which features in the WorldCat international catalogue. Granddad was a member of the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Parliament, and mostly travelled. He and grandma were a power couple, who had a beautiful understanding — she had the final say in matters related to the home, farm, children, and to a large extent community relations.

Grandma Jingi was not literate; but she knew the seasonal importance of foods, and the proportions in which they are to be used. She dried seasonal vegetables. She knew how long to cook the paddy and how much to pound it in the dheki (traditional grinder) so the grains of rice don't break.

Many women can sow and reap crops. They can make brooms, grass mats, and daily-use items with forest produce. They follow ancient rules about storing grains, and channelling wastewater back into the ground to feed the vegetable gardens and surrounding greenery.

In most tribal societies, this matrilineal chain of knowledge remains unbroken, even today. It is largely oral, passed on in mother tongues, and holds in them detailed practises of balanced consumption that gatekeep natural resources from our own greed. Daughters inherit the songs and the stories of the ecosystem — both the dos and the don'ts.

The sustainability question is key even in the ancient Munda epic about Creation — Sosobonga (Prayer to the Soso Tree). We have heard it being narrated in the slow chants of our priests in the deep hours of the night. My maternal uncle Dr. Ramdayal Munda was a famous and revered man. He was a musician, linguist, scholar, educationist, and a key figure in the creation of Jharkhand as a separate indigenous state.

From right: Grandmother Jingi Soy and Grandfather Bhaiya Ram Munda at their village house in Khunti district of Jharkhand. Khunti is politically significant because it has been central to the activities of the Jharkhand Movement.

My grandmother Jingi Soy (extreme right) with Ramdi Mundu (middle) and Chirlu. My grandfather had inspired these two bright young women from our village to pursue higher education. Ramdi returned to become the warden of Kasturba Balika Vidyalay's tribal girls' residential hostel in Lohardaga district in Jharkhand. The school was set up under the Adim Jati Sewa Mandal. The two children in the front row are her sons.

He and his academic ally Ratana Siṃha Mānakī translated Sosoboṅga into a book because it talks about warming of the air and the earth due to industry (smelting of iron in the prehistoric Iron Age), which creates disharmony among the Elements. It questions the centrality of humans in the world order and endorses a search for equilibrium.

I have closely observed Sohrai, the festival of harvest, after rice is reaped in early January. Women wash their courtyards and smear them with diluted cow dung (a natural anti-bacterial), draw floor paintings called alpana, and welcome their livestock home. They wash the feet of the cattle and partake in a khichdi (made of lentils and rice) meal with the animals on a common banana leaf. In this way, they pay homage to the livestock for their role in the running of the households and the farmlands.

You may understand now why our mountains and forests, stones and rivers, trees and wild animals are our revered totems, and why we protest when they are destroyed. To us, as to our foremothers and forefathers, they are as important as our own lives.

Today, as the world battles a climate crisis, it has created a huge uncertainty for the indigenous peoples as they depend the most on Nature; the sixth assessment of the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says they are the first and the most to be affected. This is a gigantic irony because they harm the environment the least. Indigenous women across countries, as traditional food providers, now find themselves at the forefront of efforts to adapt and mitigate the crisis. In doing so, they have emerged unlikely heroes at the high tables of climate action; in fact world bodies are looking to them in hope.

Take Tulsi Gowda of the Halakki tribe in Karnataka who has planted and nurtured 30,000 trees. Or the women of the Bonda tribe in Odisha, who have reverted to growing traditional millets in the age-old ways. The seeds have been found to be climate resilient. Their dangar chas is a unique form of shifting cultivation which a United Nations Framework on Climate Change observes as a highland cultivation that boosts nutrition supply without harming the ecosystem. There are hundreds of examples of indigenous women's action collectives silently working to boost seed sovereignty, organic farming, afforestation, integrity of water sources, and protests against undue extraction of natural resources.

A Climate Investment Fund study recommends that indigenous women should have their say in decision-making in larger climate action platforms, and come on board as partners, co-designers and identifiers of priorities for investments and implementation of programmes. Many global organisations have begun to onboard them already.

Grandma Jingi always sent us to pluck greens for the day's meal. Between lazing, playing, and other all-consuming pursuits of childhood, this felt like a chore. Some days, we would pluck extra so that we wouldn't have to go the next day. Grandma Jingi would sit us down and tell us not to take any more from Nature than we needed for the day; no hoarding, no wasting, no unnecessary craving for more. She thought it important to be concerned about a few leaves too.

Dr. Meenakshi Munda is an anthropologist with a doctoral degree from Delhi University. A visiting professor with the Department of Tribal Studies at the Central University of Jharkhand, an indigenous rights activist, and a politician, she has headed the Asia Young Indigenous Peoples Network, Philippines since 2010.

At the level of the United Nations, Munda represented Asia in its Expert Group Meeting on indigenous youth in New York in January 2013. She was a speaker at the United Nations Permanent Forum (regional dialogues) for member states to engage with indigenous communities in January 2021. She has been a part of the Working Group of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples under the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) since 2005. In March 2022, she co-drafted for the Human Rights Council the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review of India's indigenous populations.

Munda is associated with various groups and publishes studies and documentations to support the cause. In recognition of her work, she has been awarded the Aprajita Award of Prabhat Khabar (2019), the Birsa Munda Samman for Education and Social Service (2021) by the Government of India, the Sanskritik Karya Nideshalay Award (2021) by the Government of Jharkhand (2021), and the Kamala Rising Star Award (2021) by the Governor of Maharashtra.

Meri I Kirap Sapotim

Sarah Garap

What is a Better Life*

She is a girl
She has no rights
She is illiterate
She does not know
She is weak and tired
But she can't say
What is a better life?

The environment close to her
is what she has and knows
her life is routine
a day-to-day
normal life
the rules she cannot break
What is a better life?

Few of our women are educated
None of our women are paid workers
Remove the shawl
That she may be free
Let her seek education, employment
Her own destiny.

What is a better life?

Know your basic rights
Be educated
Develop your personal life.
When you are in control
You know best.

My father Garap Sasa was born in one of the remotest villages of Morobe province in Papua New Guinea (PNG). He did not receive formal schooling, but picked up spoken English while working for a German missionary as a cook and cleaner. In 1942-1943, he was forced by the Australian colonial administration to join its army in World War II. He worked as a scout and carrier. On his return after the war, my father was one of the first to be recruited by the PNG police force. His maiden posting was in Kundiawa, Simbu province. While supervising road-building work in Sina Yongomugl district, he met the chief of the Dinga tribe, Kale Kombani.

Kombani said to him, "You will marry my sister." My father visited his village Emai and met Kune Kale; she was a young girl, only about 12 or 13 years old. So, he told the chief, "I accept your offer. But let her stay in the village with her family until she is of age." After Kune reached puberty, my father brought her to Kundiawa; here, he arranged for her to stay with a Goroka family because she was still too young to marry.

Kune's mother died when she was still young. Her father brought her up. She was a fast learner. When she came away with my father, she worked hard to take care of his house and that of the Goroka family with whom she lived. They eventually got married and had nine children; one of them passed away as a baby. Many people say that they had a good marriage because my father respected my mother, and supported her in family matters and with household chores. They had a vegetable garden, a fish pond, and raised ducks, pigs, and cassowaries.

We were five boys and three girls. We grew up in a home not wanting for anything. It was a joyful house with surplus food. We were brought up in Christian faith and with a strong sense of discipline. My parents provided us with a quality education in an urban atmosphere. There was no violence at home; our parents believed in gender equality. I think a contributing factor was age-old cultural beliefs. In my mother's society, Simbu, girls are treated as 'birds of paradise' because they bring 'bride wealth' to the family, and in my father's society, Wampar, once a girl starts growing breasts, she is considered of age and cannot be mistreated in any way. So, in a country where over 60 percent women and girls experience physical or sexual violence, almost double the global average, our upbringing was exceptional. I have always fought for my rights. Even when I was little, I stood up for my sisters and confronted the bullies at school. To this day, my sisters and I get prime space to speak at family ceremonies and are considered decision-makers.

As is common in the Highlands, when I was a teenager I was adopted by my maternal aunt and her husband who lived in a village in the Simbu province; they did not have any children. They named me Maima Poiye, and showered me with privileges because they were a powerful family; I was again accorded status not commonly available to daughters.

While my biological parents brought me up in an urban culture, my adoptive parents gave me a traditional upbringing. I had the best of both worlds.

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In 1993, the Simbu Women's Resource Centre, where I worked as a Women's Development Programme Officer, was invited to participate in the Beneath Paradise Pacific Women's Documentation Project. The project funded 23 women's organisations from eight countries in the

Performers in a Sing Sing, a gathering to which tribes come to showcase their culture.

Pacific to gather documentation about women's lives. We curated stories through photographs, articles, testimonials, and poetry. The project was in preparation for the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing.

I learnt the importance of documentation and research, and how these can be used for gender-just community development and policy advocacy. I gained insights into the core values underpinning feminism — a growing space for environmental justice, representation of grassroots voices, and community-led processes for development.

It is here I was inspired to write 'What is a Better Life'*, as a part of my essay published in a collection. My essay is called 'Involving Women in Development is Not Easy: A Case Study From Karimui District, Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea'.

Finally, the much-awaited event arrived. 1995. Huairou District. Beijing. The Huairou Commission began in a tent with the GROOTS International — a global network of grassroots women's organisations and leaders, and the USA-based National Congress of Neighborhood Women. At the time, there was little space for civil society, especially the poor urban and rural women's groups, to participate in high-level conferences. Without the representation of grassroots women, the daily issues, such as access to food, livelihoods, water, and sanitation, were not being prioritised. In the tent, every day, women's groups from different countries hosted caucuses. To be in that tent meant I witnessed history rewritten. It is here grassroots feminist movements strengthened their funding potential and inclusion in decision-making at global fora.

Thereafter, for further studies, I went to the Coady Development Institute in Canada and the University of Sussex in the UK (Masters in Participation, Power, and Social Change). I found the teaching methodology of both universities raising my critical consciousness. I learnt to lead the way through collective action, knowledge-sharing and inclusive partnerships at all levels — from villages to central governments to the international community and beyond. Even though I was already involved in rights-based work, now I was determined to lead the life of a change agent.

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PNG is the eastern territory of the world's second-largest island in the Pacific Ocean, lying to the north of Australia. It owns over 5 percent of the world's biodiversity in less than 1 percent of its total land area. Geographically vulnerable to volcanic activity, earthquakes and tidal waves, its civilisational perseverance shines through its survival as one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. It is home to eight million people, mostly indigenous, and more than 800 different languages are spoken by over 10,000 community groups across 600 islands. Over 80 percent people live in villages and are dependent on agriculture, the sea, and the forest for subsistence.

PNG is fiercely patrilineal, but three of the 21 provinces are matrilineal, where women own the land and are perceived to be decision-makers. In patriarchal societies, people view women's role in nation building differently. It is a passive role, played from the margins of society and insides of homes, subjected to violence and lack of access to avenues of self-reliance. Women seeking a place in government are subdued with overwhelming intimidation. The few who have tried, and even succeeded, have had to face too much violence, corruption, and socio-cultural pressures, it has made women fearful of politics. In 2002, when I decided to contest for the SinaSina Yongomugl open seat in Simbu Province in the national elections, I learnt exactly how hard it can be. The opposition used every illegal tactic against me — corruption, rigging of rolls, intimidation of voters, bribery of officials, and controlled voting for chosen candidates in communities, where, shockingly, individual rights to vote have never been recognised by the ruling party.

As I write this, in a small but not insignificant victory, women have returned to PNG's Parliament for the first time since 2017. Kessy Sawang and Rufina Peter have been voted into PNG's 118-seat Parliament.

Between 1982 and 1992, and 2017-2022, the Parliament had no women. In all, there have been only 11 women parliamentarians since our Independence in 1975.

All past and present governments have signed policies and programmatic instruments for gender equality and equity. These include CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). SDG 5.5 clearly calls for women's "full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life." Yet, Prime Minister James Marape, who also held the post in the last government, was quoted saying (later, even in a post on Facebook), "I want to encourage our PNGeans to think (stay) away from gender issues. Ministers we have here represent women anyway…"

This is a horrific crisis, and not just in terms of social justice, because the Pacific islands and its indigenous-majority populations are on the global frontlines of the battle against climate change. What is the connection, you may ask!

In PNG, the Constitution protects land rights of the indigenous people; we own 80 percent. This includes the rivers, forests, coastlines, animal life, and plant life. The National Forests Authority manages forest resources and the environment.

Since PNG is very rich in natural resources, extractive industries have altered the societal dynamics. Tribes that once, more or less, sustainably coexisted now are fighting for and over royalties from industries.

At any stage of development, increase in population and poverty creates energy and environmental stresses. To find food, fuel, and shelter, communities are forced to burn and cut forests, overuse and misuse farmlands, and pollute and exhaust water supplies. There are large initiatives that have been established to promote reforestation that even talk about carbon trade exchange programmes. In coastal villages, planting of mangroves is encouraged as they protect habitats and food gardens from storm surges, and pull in greenhouse gases from the atmosphere into their soils significantly more than other tropical forests.

We encourage rural women to participate in the initiatives, not just because they and their children are vulnerable to climate change (loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, violence over scarce resources, and trafficking), but also because the government completely overlooks their potential in strengthening climate action. Everyone knows our women

The Pacific islands and its indigenous-majority populations are on the global frontlines of the battle against climate change.

are keepers of extremely rich traditional knowledge systems and solutions. These systems have evolved and adapted to environmental changes over centuries. But women are discouraged in every way to express, share, or apply the knowledge. Why should Pacific Islands women remain victims when they can empower communities?

Hundreds of activists and groups are working for sustainability through the gender lens. I am a proud founder of two such movements.

In the year 2000, I wrote an article written under my adoptive name, Maima Poiye. At that time, I was a public servant and hence could not represent my voice in the media under the Public Services General Orders Act. In that piece, I spoke about why two women who contested provincial seats in 1997 did not run again in the 2000 by-election. I cited that the women in the country, especially Highlands' women, live as beasts of burden, have co-opted patriarchy, do not aspire for space in decision-making processes, and have all but conceded political leadership to men. In support of my piece, a prominent cartoonist Biliso Osake published a cartoon in The National. This drew a lot of attention.

Women, especially in the Simbu province in the Highlands, took a stand. They decided to "go for the kill", which meant come what may — violence, lack of funds, dirty politics — they would contest the 2002 elections and give it their best shot. 36 women in the province contested — 28 for ward council seats and eight for the Parliament. Only three of them won, that too at the ward level.

My organisation, Meri I Kirap Sapotim (Women Arise! Support!) was born in the aftermath, at a time when rights of women, children, and vulnerable population groups had weakened to an all-time low, and basic government services due to them had threateningly declined.

MIKS began to work with systems, processes, policies, and communities on gender justice and sustainable democracy. Our aim was clear: maximise women's leadership in governance and positions of decision-making.

MIKS has over 500 members in the seven Highlands provinces, which provide leadership development training, and proactively support candidates who stand for elections. The organisation has emerged as a rich network for women leaders.

MIKS also feeds into the Kup Women for Peace, a network I co-founded. Kup focuses on peacebuilding. Infighting among tribes in Kup is endemic. Women become inextricably linked to the violence, mostly as victims. We help them organise into registered groups and work for economic empowerment, and leadership development.

Anggia Anggraini Burchill, a gender protection specialist like me, explains in her writings, "Traditionally, fights between tribes erupt over land disputes, the bride price of women or the possession of pigs. For instance, the ongoing Tigibi tribal war broke out in 2013 over a family quarrel, first fought with bows and arrows and later escalating into shooting with semi-automatic assault rifles. Crops were destroyed and villages left empty… the proliferation of guns has exacerbated these tribal conflicts. Furthermore, governance structures at all levels are weak, leading to a breakdown of law and order… One more recent cause of inter-tribal violence concerns the allocation of royalties from extractive industries operating in the region… Some people are perceived to get wealthy while others are not. Jealousy over assets like cars arose. This issue has fuelled a strong sense of discontent in the poor region, resulting in rising tensions. Fighting leads to displacement, but host communities in other areas do not always welcome the newly arriving families. Many women are widowed which exposes them and their children to exploitation, sexual assault and food insecurity. Despite their vulnerability, however, women in PNG play a prominent role in conflict resolution. They are perceived as "neutral", since their connection to a local group is commonly through marriage rather than descent. Women also draw on indigenous customs of Peacebuilding like gift exchange. They are usually the first to return to communities in the aftermath of conflict and act as the pioneers of peace and reconciliation."

Without peace, women will always be firefighting, trying to catch up, never arriving. So, civil society has been working on strengthening informal village courts, which enjoy a tremendous amount of social approval, with programmes focusing on gender empathy. I have attended these courts and found several decisions supportive of gender justice and children's protection and welfare.

In 2016, I helped register a political party, WINGS — Wantok in Godly Services — for the purpose of selecting credible leaders for all levels of elections, 70 percent of whom have to be women. In PNG, wantok means 'one talk' — tribespeople who share a common language and are bound by a reciprocal relationship. We lobby for a women's wing in the Parliament.

We also work in partnership with the Electoral Commission. It has co-opted our members and trainers to build awareness and disseminate information during the polls.

In the 2017 national elections, Jiwaka MIKS members self-funded a voter awareness campaign on candidate selections, covering a total of six districts with road access in two provinces and reaching more than 3,000 people.

In this kind of intense work, one has to engage with every sector to iron out imbalances. So, between 2010 and 2018 I worked with ExxonMobil on the PNG Liquefied Gas Project as a community development, gender and democratic governance specialist.

Funding remains our biggest challenge because we are threatening the status quo, the people who control the money.

MIKS has called out to a number of women's groups, faith-based organisations, and civil society organisations to stand with human rights advocates and push for the appointment of at least one of the female parliamentarians to a ministerial portfolio.

MIKS has a noble calling for the people and the planet. It is a movement to emancipate women from an oppressive system and increase their representation in decision-making processes. It is a movement for transformational politics that looks at equity as a guiding principle. We require more women change agents in the grassroots so that we can create new pathways.

MIKS has over 500 members in the seven Highlands provinces. It provides leadership development training and proactively supports candidates who contest elections.

A community development facilitator, democratic governance specialist, a Peace Fellow, and a rights activist, Sarah Garap is a prominent gender justice voice in PNG, Melanesia, and the Pacific Islands. Garap has worked for decades with the government, donor agencies, and civil society organisations. The initiatives have been related to social justice, good governance, human rights education, child rights protection, crime prevention and restorative justice, counselling victims of violence, and education to increase women participation in political leadership.

She is a visitor with the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. She has also assisted the Small Arms Survey in the Southern Highlands Province and analysed governance in that province for the University of Queensland. Since 2020, she has been working on an ad hoc basis as a volunteer with women's groups. Being 'unemployed', much of her time is spent on vegetable gardening for sustenance.


Three Colours **Green**

Of Soil, Water, Land, and My Own Being

Padma Shri Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Singh Vyam

Can an entire forest be seen in a tree? The birds, animals and humans who live because of it, included?

I am Durga Vyam and I live with my family in Sonpuri in Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh — my marital home. This is not where I started my journey as an artist. That was Barbaspur, the village where I was born.

I don't exaggerate when I say that my art — Digna — is that of the land, of the soil, of the water, and our being. I work with black soil, red soil, white soil, and yellow soil. They are my base palette. I mix them using the water from our streams to recreate stories of our land. To do this, I must dig deep into my heart and find love.

Digna is essentially storytelling. It narrates how Mother Earth came to be, how water connects everything, how marriage rituals came into practice, and so on. The stories I heard from my grandmother inspire me.

As a child, I saw my grandmother making Digna paintings. It is a form practised by the Gond Pardhan tribe. I began to learn from her. Painted on walls and floors of houses during festivities, Digna has a distinct visual language. It tells of our heritage, history, genealogy, legends, and mythology. Every character in a Digna is intertwined and apart, all at the same time. To tell you how it came to be painted on paper, I have to tell you about Jangarh Singh Shyam.

Shyam lived in Patangarh village nearby and was related to us. From his humble roots, he rose and pioneered the art form as it is known today. He started the Jangarh Kalam — a movement that took the neglected Digna from the walls of our homes, put it on canvases, and the world map. His works travelled to many countries; he was invited for residencies. Tragically, he committed suicide in Japan. He was working on a large commission at a museum. The year was 2001 and he was just 40. In 2010, his painting, titled Landscape with Spider, was bought at a Sotheby's auction of South Asian Art in New York — a never-before for any Indian indigenous artist. When I met him, he encouraged and advised me to not merely repeat what people had done for ages. He fuelled my imagination and broadened my horizons. Now, my art talks about social, political and environmental issues.

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My name is Subhash Singh Vyam. In our community a groom and a bride see each other for the first time at their wedding. To start things off, the groom's parents go and meet the bride and her family. Even the discussions are beautiful. Daughters are considered an image of Laxmi, the Goddess of Prosperity. No one goes and says, 'Oh, we want your daughter's hand in marriage for our son.' How can you ask for the prosperity of a family to be taken away? So, the parents go and say, we have seen Kutki (a type of local millet which is also considered a symbol of prosperity) around here, and we would like to make her a member of our family.

My parents chose Durga as my partner. We got married when we both were in our mid-teens. We have three children and they are part of our artistic journey.

I was trained in wood art and still work on it. Some of my work was exhibited during the Kochi Biennale[1] and on the walls of various important buildings. But, when I got married to Durga, and finally met Jangarh Singh Shyam, I started practicing Digna too. We trained with Jangarh in Bhopal. We also exhibited alongside him in Delhi and a few other places. He was only a decade or so older but had the wisdom of ages.

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Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability was a turning point.

The publisher contacted us and shared the idea of a story about Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar[2]. Ambedkar fought for the rights of the weak and downtrodden — people like us — yet, we didn't know much about him. We started the research, and our children helped. We learnt how he fought against untouchability. The design inspiration was drawn from children's books. The idea was to make the story easy to understand. It took us nearly two years to finish.

It was a process. The publisher showed us nearly 20 different books for reference, but we were sure that we wanted to do it in our own style. We started sketching. After two weeks of intensive work, we went to Delhi to show our initial interpretation. The feedback was disheartening.

We asked for some time and promised them that if they did not like the next round of work, we would withdraw. We got back to the drawing board and decided to use the authentic Digna form using soils of different kinds. This time the publishers loved it. The rest is well known. The graphic biography, in such a short time, has been considered among the top political narratives in this genre. It has been translated into 11 languages. The Journal of Folklore Research says, "Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability begins and ends with gratitude. Storytellers S. Anand and Srividya Natarajan collaborated with traditional painters Durgabai and Subhash Vyam in recounting several moments in the life of Indian revolutionary Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. The book thus begins with a dedication for the Vyams' teacher, Jangarh Singh Shyam, and ends with thanks for the chance to shape conversations about

minority issues in India. The combination of political narrative and Gond painting in Bhimayana is innovative and striking, but, as a graphic novel published in New Delhi in 2011, this work fits within the current context of graphic narratives that push the boundaries between folk art, the comics medium, and politically active narratives. In particular, Bhimayana demonstrates a move toward more complex storytelling, specifically in drawing on traditional Indian art forms and the comics-journalism of internationally renowned comics creators like Joe Sacco."

While we work together, we have our uniqueness. Our dots, lines, strokes, imagination, are as different as our signatures. If you ask us to make a painting of you, we will observe what you do, what you like, how you smile. Accordingly, we will create a picture of you based on our own imagination. The beauty of Digna is in how we use our imagination to blur the lines of forms. Everyone knows what a cow looks like, but when we draw a cow, it is different. Interpretation of our art needs the viewers to exercise their imagination.

We avoid working on assignments in which the client wants us to execute a brief. We don't do that. Some people expect us to do the classical fine arts. We don't work on projects that require us to copy anything. Will we portray a story that someone brings? Yes, but in our own style.

We have also founded the Digna Kala Madhyam, an organisation to train artists and nurture Gond art in our villages. Our workshops on painting, mask-making, woodwork, clay art, and playing and making musical instruments are our way to save the legacy of our forefathers.

Our art is also a way for us to make a statement. We have recently received a commission to narrate the story of Narmada. Due to the expansion of the Narmada Valley Project, a lot of areas in and around our village will be submerged. Through our art, we are going to explain how this will ruin the ecology and our lives. People will be able to understand. We can't protest and fight. We are artists, art is our language, and we speak with our brush.

The Late Jangarh Shyam Singh
(Image Credit: By Jimparsons73 — Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=42174815)

References

1. Launched in 2012, Kochi-Muziris Biennale is India's first ever international contemporary art exhibition held in the port city of Kochi.
2. B. R. Ambedkar, a jurist, an economist, and a social reformer, is best remembered for his role as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, which allowed him to leave a profound mark on Indian trajectories of democratic justice and affirmative action policy.

Durga Vyam is one of the foremost artists working in the Pardhan Gond tradition of Digna art. Vyam's work is rooted in the rich folklore and mythologies of her people. Even while using the pointillist dots, fine dashes and minute waves, Vyam's use of vibrant colours for stippling is unique, matched by the fable-like quality of her paintings. Vyam is the author and illustrator of several books. She is the Recipient of Padma Shri (2022), one of India's highest civilian awards. She works to preserve and propagate the art form through Digna Kala Madhyam, an organisation she runs with her husband.

Subhash Vyam is a Pardhan Gond Artist, who after his initial forays in clay and wooden sculpture, began to practise the tradition of stippled painting like his wife Durga and his acclaimed brother-in-law Jangarh Singh Shyam. Particularly fond of blacks, his works are often simple ink on paper renditions. Even when he uses colours, he often chooses to leave segments of his landscapes in black and white, with only some coloured bits. His favourite subjects are aquatic life. Growing up in a village devoid of running water taught him not only of its significance as a natural resource but as a parable of life. Drawing on this, Vyam authored Water, an illustrative book — part autobiography, part mythology, and part social commentary.

There once lived a king, with his queen and daughter. The kingdom was small, but prosperous. The secret of this prosperity was his horse. The mystical creature's excreta was gold and diamonds.

The young princess grew up to be the most beautiful woman in the land. But the queen's health began to fail. On her deathbed, she told the king to take care of the kingdom. She asked him to arrange the daughter's marriage. She also asked him not to part with the horse until their daughter wanted it.

The queen passed away. In time, the daughter was ready for marriage. She asked the king for the horse, now that his kingdom had become so wealthy and secure for decades to come. She wanted to build the prosperity of the new kingdom she would be marrying into. But greed set in; the king did not want to part with the horse.

So the princess stole it and fled. She rode it till she could ride no more. It was a new kingdom. She settled down as an ordinary citizen. One day, the crown prince saw her. They fell in love and got married. The princess revealed to him her true identity and the secret of the horse. The prince, princess, and the people of the kingdom lived happily ever after.

Oral Epics and Block Prints: The Road to Redemption

Dr. Madan Meena

The first human communication occurred through experiments with sounds and signs. This probably dates back to the Paleolithic age or earlier. From 30,000 to 40,000 years ago, the beginning of religion and painting was discerned in the most advanced species — Homo sapiens — to which all modern human beings belong. Speech developed as a mode of expression. It was during this time that Homo sapiens started settling down, often in caves. They decorated the walls with images of wild animals and etched their hunting strategies with chalks and stones.

Later, when they began to live a more organised life, civilisations developed on the banks of rivers. Scripts and languages evolved, trade and commerce crossed oceans and continents, industrialisation shifted the locus from fields to factories, and now we are in the thick of globalisation. The developments of the 21st century have been mostly technology-driven, destructive in nature, and insensitive to the environment.

I was born in a village in Rajasthan. When I was a teenager, I was sent to Kota, an industrial town, so that I could receive a better quality of education. I longed for home — its fields and mountains, the smell of the earth and plants, the seasonal festivities. The mud house in which I was born had a beautiful granary decorated with relief patterns. The floor was regularly adorned with mandana paintings made by my aunts and mother. Coated in white clay, its walls had a smooth finish. The slanted tiled roof made it airy.

The major attraction of the house was the granary, which was a treasure trove for us kids because our favourite eatables like jaggery, ghee (clarified butter), fruits, curd and sweets were stored in it. My grandmother held its keys. Whenever I got an opportunity to visit, my grandmother would lovingly lay out food. My favourite was curd and fresh butter. One day the house was dismantled and replaced by a concrete structure.

For higher studies, I opted for fine arts and learned about various traditions across the world. But the subjects were largely about the classical arts, with no mention of the indigenous and folk forms. Consequently, after my post-graduation, for my Ph.D. I chose to study the cultural history and arts of my own community.

This gave me an opportunity to travel widely to hundreds of Meena villages I had not seen before. To my surprise, there were still many places where the practice of painting on walls prevailed in all its beauty and functionality. I was aware that even in the most obscure settlements, traditional houses would soon be replaced with concrete structures. So I started collecting the wall paintings by the Meena women on brown sheets of paper. Around a dozen exhibitions were organised with these artworks in India and abroad.

I duly completed my Ph.D. over the next six years, but my travel to the villages continued for 15 years, resulting in a collection of more than 1,00,000 photographs, 500 paintings, and a unique collation of craft items.

I came in contact with a prominent folklorist of Rajasthan, Komal Kothari, who was working on the design for his desert museum outside Jodhpur city. He wanted it built along the lines of a typical Meena house. I assisted him in the design and even curated the first exhibition — it showcased brooms.

Kothari inspired me to work on the oral traditions of eastern Rajasthan. I started to work on two important oral epics — Bagrawat and Tejaji. Rural communities sing these in praise of heroic deities. While recording them, I came across the musicians of the Kanjar community in Bundi district, popular for singing Tejaji. One night, I landed in one of their villages to record them singing in a jagran, which are overnight congregations for devotional music. During breaks, they conversed in a language distinct from the regional language. This piqued my interest. I wanted to understand their 'Parsi' language and soon started working on its dictionary.

Shortly thereafter, I had a chance meeting with the eminent linguist Dr. Ganesh Devy, who inducted me into his language-mapping project, The People's Linguistic Survey of India. It is a rights-based movement carrying out a nationwide survey to identify, document and understand the state of Indian languages, especially languages of fragile nomadic, coastal, island and forest communities.

With the help of my friend Dr. Suraj Rao, we researched 30 languages from Rajasthan. Meanwhile, my growing understanding about the larger aspect of culture helped me share my learnings with students of the National Institute of Design, the National Institute of Fashion Technology, and the Indian Institute of Craft and Design.

While teaching at these institutes, I developed an interest in the traditional block print designs. I travelled across Rajasthan to meet block carvers and discovered a rich repertoire of designs that are gradually being forgotten by the new generation of textile designers and printers. I started cataloguing them and tasked some of my design students with the research. The work on textiles is similar to the work with Meena

Many Meena houses showcase traditional paintings.

paintings. They both speak of cultural diversity, community-specific designs, aesthetic choices, and the social identities of the communities.

My work with oral traditions and visual cultures helps me understand the diverse cultural heritage preserved by various communities across different ethnocultural zones. If our education system recognised art and culture as important, we would have valued and preserved the very aspects which are lost to development. Had we not lost this cultural heritage, we would have been more civilised in the sense that we would have developed in a manner more harmonious with Nature.

My journey has been a learning experience in understanding a section of society underrepresented in academics and the media. For example, my work on languages introduced me to the Denotified Tribes (DNTs), who still bear the stigma of criminality and social discrimination. While studying them, I discovered that in pre-Independence India members of the Meena tribe were considered troublemakers, and this was one of the reasons for the passage of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). On October 12, 1871, the British government enforced the CTA that branded many nomadic, semi-nomadic, and tribal communities as criminals by birth. The local government was empowered to notify any tribe, gang, or class of people as 'criminals' and put them in reformatory settlements. Almost all of them were nomadic tribes that have a strong, internal social structure. The brunt fell on gypsies and aboriginal tribes, who 'wandered' as part of their lifestyle, and had independent laws and rules. Their 'crime' was that they didn't fall into the 'civilised' order of colonial India.

Based on all this documentation and research, and with the help of a couple of my design students, I started work on the traditional crafts of the DNTs, crafts that can help earn a decent living. Young block printers from Bagru (Jaipur), and eminent Ajrakh printer Ranamal Khatri of Barmer have evinced interest in my block print documentation. Taking inspiration from it, they are reviving designs that are finding a good market. Similarly, my book on the Tejaji ballad has been picked up by young musicians who now sing it. The recordings were published online by the University of Cambridge, UK, as part of the World Oral History Project. These are a few examples of how research leads to the recognition and preservation of cultural practices which would otherwise die unnoticed.

We are in danger of losing the wealth of knowledge and wisdom we have acquired with hundreds of years of hard work. The visionless development taking place in the world now is leading to a dark future for our children. My determination to challenge this has become stronger ever since I started working with the Adivasi Academy in tribal Gujarat.

The Adivasi Academy is located in Tejgadh, a tribal village situated 90 kilometres east of Vadodara, at the foot of the majestic Koraj hill. The hill, full of craggy-rocks, is entirely unpopulated. It has an archaeological site bearing prehistoric rock paintings dating back to 15,000 B.C. With the purpose of creating new approaches to academics, and social, cultural and developmental interventions, the academy is devoted to the study of indigenous history, folklore, cultural geography, social dynamics, economy, development studies, medicine, music, arts and theatre.

We have to reimagine our democracy bearing Nature in mind and not just people. A glimpse into the following Tejaji ballad which I have translated for your understanding picturises this beautifully. It is about the centrality of monsoons in relation to Earth, and not just to people.

Rainy months have set in, hail rainy months!
Watch this nonstop torrent, hail rainy months!

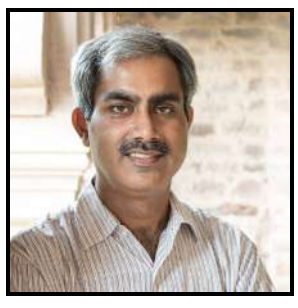
Clouds gather in the northern skies, and bolts strike Earth,
In the black — quicksilver-like — hail rainy months!

Falling beads bejewel Earth, o jewel of Earth!
Lightning lights them up, o jewel of Earth!

Madan Meena is a visual artist and researcher working extensively with rural, nomadic and tribal communities. His association with his region and its people led him to do his doctorate in the 'Art of the Meena Tribe'. His work on the subject is available in his two published books — Joy of Creativity and Nurturing Walls.

Supported by a grant from Cambridge University, his interest in folklore led him to research the diverse repertoire of the Tejaji ballad sung across central and south-eastern Rajasthan. Meena's interest in languages also led him to start work on the language of denotified and nomadic tribes. Meena has an abiding interest in India's languishing traditional crafts, a subject which he also teaches at some of the leading design institutes of India.

He is a trustee of Bhasha Research and Publication Centre (Vadodara, Gujarat), executive member of Kota Heritage Society, and a board member of the Gramin Shiksha Kendra — Sawai Madhopur (Rajasthan). One of his important responsibilities is with the Adivasi Academy, the signature project of Bhasha, where he is an honorary director. He can be reached at madan4meena@gmail.com.



Shiny New Script for an Ancient Tongue

Banwang Losu

May 18, 2020. I undertook what was perhaps the most overwhelming journey of my life. 53 of us from Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India, who work or study in cities and towns of Maharashtra in western India, hired two buses to leave for home.

I am a postgraduate student of linguistics at the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute in Pune, which had been forced to close its gates. The hostels of almost all institutes had shut, and with them, their kitchens. Examinations were suspended indefinitely. Jobs had disappeared overnight. The declaration of the nationwide lockdown was so sudden that migrant farmers, construction labourers, travellers, outstation workers, drivers, everyone was stuck. When they tried to get home, they were beaten back by the police. Among the worst-off, we found, were daily-wage workers from the Northeast.

I put my books aside in my small hostel room and called my friend Nima Wangsu in Bengaluru. We created a WhatsApp group for people from our region who were stranded and desperately needed food and essential commodities. Within a day hundreds joined. Simultaneously, Jachonia Islary (who runs the Arunachal State Rural Livelihood Mission) and I began to raise funds. We asked the workers to go to nearby shops and buy what they needed, and we paid the shopkeepers online. As more people came asking for help, our schedules became crazy. But everyone kept working. In fact, individuals and organisations who were funding us even went with supplies to the doorsteps of the needy who could not make it to the shops.

As the situation became more and more untenable, one day, it was time to go home.

None of us in our group that left Pune for Arunachal Pradesh had enough food. We ate fruits till we reached Wardha to pick up a Ph.D. student from the Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwa Vidyalaya. The faculty there went above and beyond to provide us with as many supplies as they could. During the journey we had to ensure that we did not enter any areas designated as red zones. When we had to relieve ourselves we requested the driver to stop at secluded spots. After five nights of continuous travel, covering more than 3,000 kilometres, surviving on one meal a day, we reached the Banderdewa Police Training Centre near the Arunachal Pradesh-Assam interstate boundary. We were moved into quarantine right away at Kannubari, Longding district.

Finally, I was home.

There were no Covid-19 cases in our village, Kamhua Noknu. Soon, we were able to resume teachers' training classes under the Wancho Literary Mission (WLM) for 230 fellows, with prior permission of the administration. You wonder what WLM is? Let us go back a couple of decades.

I had an interesting childhood. I would take care of my brothers when my mother would be in the fields, often with the baby of the family tied to her back. Walking to school through all that greenery along with my siblings and friends was great fun.

From time immemorial, the people in these parts have practised shifting cultivation, raising crops like rice, millet, maize, arum, soybean, tapioca, yam, and a variety of vegetables. The other sources of livelihood are animal husbandry and cultivation of cash crops like black cardamom, tea, betel leaf, betel nut and grass brooms. Our village is still not connected well to road and telecommunication networks. A public health centre has opened only recently.

When I was in standard XI in a government school in Longding, I was collecting data in English for a documentation project, in collaboration with senior teachers. I later had to translate it into Wancho using Roman alphabets. Wancho is my mother tongue, which is an ancient, oral language. When I got down to the task, I realised that the script does not hold in it the exact pronunciation of the language or its tonal sounds; this is critical because in Wancho if the sound changes, the meaning of the word changes.

This got me interested, and slowly I began to develop the Wancho script. It took almost 12 years. I shared my research with friends and local government officers to generate awareness and support.

The Wancho Cultural Society (WCS) and the Wancho Students' Union (WSU) held seminars, workshops, and conferences on the new script across Longding district. After the script was accepted and approved by the community, the first book, The Wancho Script, was published by the imprint Partridge Penguin in 2013.

Wancho is spoken largely in Longding district, in about 67 villages, by about 50,000 people. This excludes the Wancho diaspora in other districts, states and countries.

To preserve the language and promote the new script, we had to not only create a script, but also create it in the virtual space to get school children and young adults interested. So, we developed a cartoon animation video along with the book.

Banwang Losu at Samvaad 2022 during unveiling of his books in Wancho, enabled by the Samvaad Fellowship.

About the time the book was released, I met with Professor Stephen Morey, a senior linguist from La Trobe University. He brought in the team for the Wancho Unicode project. Michael Everson (alphabetologist), Andrew Cunningham, Stephen Morey and Debbie Lotz were the team members for Unicode development. The US National Endowment for the Humanities gave a grant for the project. Dipankar Baruah developed the typeface font. Anurag Gautam helped develop it for use on computers. Zachary Quinn Scheuren, an exceptional American Unicode font developer, developed the Wancho Unicode font (NotoSans) in 2019, which made it accessible for use on the internet. The font is now available even on Google Fonts for download and use.

Sedan Nursery School, Kamhua Noknu, began its academic session in June 2019 under the WLM banner. The school teaches children the Wancho script along with English, Mathematics, Hindi and other subjects. There are a few technical issues yet to be resolved regarding how the script renders on digital devices. But the acceptance by the Unicode Consortium opens up access to platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook to name a few, as well as online education programmes.

The teachers' training workshops have resulted in the publication of three sample books titled Sedan (The Rising Sun) for classes VI, VII and VIII. This takes us a step further in preparing the Wancho syllabus.

Jatwang Wangsa and Nokchak Apesam helped guide the syllabus. It comprises endangered native stories, folk songs, and science. It has been printed by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Government of Arunachal Pradesh. These are baby steps yet in a long journey ahead.

The Wancho Alphabet

𞋀 𞋁 𞋂 𞋃 𞋄 𞋅 𞋆 𞋇 𞋈 𞋉 𞋊 𞋋 𞋌 𞋍 𞋎 𞋏 𞋐 𞋑
𞋒 𞋓 𞋔 𞋕 𞋖 𞋗 𞋘 𞋙 𞋚 𞋛 𞋜 𞋝 𞋞 𞋟 𞋠 𞋡 𞋢 𞋣
𞋤 𞋥 𞋦 𞋧 𞋨 𞋩 𞋪 𞋫 𞋬 𞋭 𞋮 𞋯

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I Speak Mundari, Therefore I Am

Hercules Singh Munda

As I pack my bags for London, I take it all in for the last time. The last couple of weeks have passed on a similar note; the last meeting with cousins, the last coffee with colleagues, the last party with friends, the last meal with the family. Next time we meet, everything else may stay the same (which I doubt); I certainly won't.

I am fighting back tears. I am leaving behind my land, my forest, my people. The memories, I have packed tight inside of me. I have travelled within the country. But when you have grown up like me, in an indigenous village, deeply tethered to the land, going away so far for so long seems unreal.

It is not that I have not dreamed about the countries that Jaipal Singh Munda[1] saw as the hockey captain of India; he led the team to clinch gold in the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam. Indeed, I have been deeply interested in the universities of North America where anthropologist and linguist Ram Dayal Munda[2] got his Ph.D. at the prestigious Chicago University. He was subsequently appointed in the university's Department of South Asian Studies, where he pioneered the teaching of the Indic group of Austro-Asiatic languages.

They both returned deeply politically charged, taking up the destiny of India's indigenous identity as a cause; Jaipal Singh to debate with newborn India's tallest leaders in the Constituent Assembly in 1946 for the rights of indigenous peoples, and Ram Dayal to lead the Jharkhand Movement in the 1980s.

How would I return, I wonder. All my adult life, I have wanted this; now that the moment nears, I think about how it will be for an indigenous linguist to set foot in the United Kingdom, the land of the erstwhile colonial regime that disempowered tribal identity.

I was born to a Munda family in a hamlet in Bangaon village in Jharkhand on December 10, 1993, delivered at home by a village midwife. My father was a forest guard. When I was a little older, he was transferred to a small hill station called Kiriburu; it is the last census town on the border of Odisha and Jharkhand. Nature here is spellbinding, but it once resounded with the guns of the Maoists and security forces. Bomb blasts, killings, and police raids were all too common. My parents, concerned for my safety, packed me off to a missionary residential school. I was miserable; I cried every day. However, the rigid routine kept me grounded; I was always a class topper. After school, I went to the state capital Ranchi for higher education.

Ranchi opened up my world. I made friends from every walk of life. I could adjust to city life without much discomfort. Few years later, while studying engineering at BIT, Mesra, my roots began to tug at me. There was no representation in the student bodies for environmental concerns. That troubled me terribly because Nature is the supreme god, soul, mother of my community. It is my religion. I co-founded an ecology club.

January 2015. I joined the Outlook group as a marketing and sales intern. It was a conscious decision to explore the non-technical aspects of an organisation. The Outlook appreciated my tenure. New media was booming. I took my chances and dived headlong into journalism. Over the next three years, I travelled and reported on stories from different regions. This gave me a sense of the magnitude and diversity of India. I didn't know so many people were struggling for work, for identity, for dignity. During this phase, I became passionate about the preservation of indigenous languages.

I have always run back home whenever I could, especially during holidays and festivals. This time when I went, I was quick to notice that my young cousins, seven years and under, did not follow Mundari[3], our mother tongue, at all.

The loss of a language does irreparable damage; the identity of an entire people dies. However, there is no point in conserving a language if it is not in use. I surveyed about 1,200 tribal-language speakers. I asked them if they would like their language to be included in schools and colleges. The answer was an overwhelming yes. It is easier said.

Most tribal languages are oral in nature; they do not have a written script or a great number of speakers. They are being overpowered by the languages of migrants. Even the ones with a sizeable number of speakers rarely find recognition in our education, administration, and governance. What further complicates the picture is that the indigenous youth are losing touch with their roots.

This conundrum inspired me to design the TriLingo app, a platform for learning indigenous languages that enables conservation, which finally leads to adoption. The mission of TriLingo, an innovative mix of technologies based on the principles of computational linguistics, is to digitally document all languages across India so that eventually they are used by the respective communities for education and on social media. Right now we are more focused on indigenous languages because they are the most threatened.

TriLingo was launched on August 15, 2019. One of the first languages to be digitised was Mundari. We are currently focused on two other major

With the Soo people of Tepeth Country in Uganda. Their language is critically endangered, with less than a few hundred speakers remaining.

languages — Santali[4] and Ho[5] — from my home state Jharkhand. We have a team on the ground to translate the words and sentences and collate cultural and sociological references.

The Samvaad Tribal Leadership Programme (TLP) fellowship came at the right juncture. There was a lot of information and support available from senior fellows and peers. From them, I learnt about a conference on indigenous languages in Gujarat and was able to meet a person who had mentioned my work in his Ph.D. A fellow in Hyderabad even facilitated meetings with the Indian School of Business and Microsoft.

I met a senior fellow, Banwang Losu, who after 18 years of sustained work has developed a script for the Wancho[6] language. He had also successfully registered Wancho in the US-based Unicode Consortium in 2019 so that it could be used on the Internet. We are working together on the next level of linguistic research into Wancho.

I also met a delegate from Uganda, Albert Lokuru, a Member of Parliament from Tepeth County. His language Soo is critically endangered with less than a few hundred speakers remaining. In fact, only a dozen community elders really know the complexities and layers of Soo; the younger generation has mostly moved away for education and jobs and speak English. I have begun to work on Soo with an international grant; the work is in its early stages.

We will keep adding languages to TriLingo. We are not a big team, so it will take some time, but our larger plan is to be included in a service like Google Assistant.

Tribal people have been misrepresented in mainstream media for too long. Tribal communities are depicted as insular and orthodox, when, in fact, our societies are a storehouse of learning. I regularly interview leaders and changemakers of various tribes and learn about their lives

and literature. I blog about these interviews on Medium, an online platform.

Most tribal people, as you know, are multilingual; despite this linguistic proficiency, we are losing speakers. I analysed the findings of my survey, compiled my insights and wrote a paper — The Future of Multilingualism in Jharkhand, a Land of 19 Languages. I presented this paper at an international conference held annually by the Linguistic Society of India at the Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU), Amarkantak. It makes a case for activating languages to preserve them. As a practical demonstration of what can be done, during the Covid-19 lockdown in March-April 2020, we released awareness videos in Ho, Santali, and Mundari.

In June 2020, TriLingo was selected by the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIMC) Innovation Park; I was chosen as an entrepreneur-in-residence for an incubation programme under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeiTY). With the grant, we were able to launch the Tribal Language Classroom Programme for Mundari, Santhali, Ho, and Kurukh.

Furthermore, we were declared a Top 10 Social Enterprise by the Indian School of Business — Changemakers Forum. We continue to work on technology-driven language conservation tools.

In July 2021, TriLingo was selected by the Atal Incubation Centre-Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini (RMP) Foundation; it has been set up in alignment with the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), NITI Aayog, the public policy think tank of the Government of India, to nurture, handhold and support 'New-Age Entrepreneurs for New-Age India'. Here I worked on the Endangered Language Project, and then, to study further, applied for the master's programme in linguistics at The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. That is where I am headed.

At the TLP, I had the fortune to meet and interact with Dr. Ganesh Devy, the man who, as the chairman of the People's Linguistic Survey of India (2010-2013) had discovered 780 Indian languages. He is a language activist like no other. He says that if the government protects the livelihoods of the indigenous people, our culture and languages will survive. If people have work in their villages, they will not migrate and adapt to another way of communication.

As I pack my bags, I remember one cold winter morning in Delhi. It was 5 am when my phone rang. My father was on the line. He quietly said that my grandmother had passed away. I booked the first flight out. All along the journey, my tears would not stop.

I sat against a wall in my village home; I felt overwhelmed. My home is a far cry from the comforts of a heated room in the national capital. The walls are made of mud and bamboo, with patterns made of earth and cow dung. I remembered the stories about my grandfather my grandmother had told me. He had barely studied till the third standard, but somehow had been chosen to be the headmaster of the local school. When I was younger I wondered how a man with no qualifications ran a school. Now I understand what a big achievement it was to educate children in forest villages; no certificate could prepare anyone for a job like this. He was self-taught and valued for his earnest efforts.

I realised that I was getting disconnected from my roots, in unobvious ways. I could no longer speak at ease about the livestock, forest, weather or harvest. I know how enchanting and nurturing it is to grow up in large families, in close-knit communities, despite poverty. And now, among the last ties with my childhood, my grandmother, who was always interested in everything I did, was gone. I had inadvertently cultivated this distance, and it was time to return. Mundari is my path to reignite that lost sense of belonging. Even though I am going away, it is in search of my roots. I travel for knowledge. I will be back so that I can share the ways in which one can intellectually and economically thrive without being dislocated from our waters, forests, and lands. And languages.

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1. Jaipal Singh Munda (1903-1970) was one of the tallest tribal leaders of India. He began his career as the captain of the Indian field hockey team that won the gold in the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam. He was the first Indian to ask for a separate state for the indigenous people of central India. His arguments in 1946 for the security of indigenous rights before the Constituent Assembly of India, which was framing the Constitution, is historic.
2. Padma Shri Ram Dayal Munda (1939-2011) was one of the prominent faces of the Jharkhand Movement. He obtained a degree in linguistics from the University of Chicago, and was instrumental in the setting up of studies on indigenous India in American universities. He returned to mobilise not just the political movement for a separate state of Jharkhand for the indigenous people, he also galvanised education, tribal studies, and tribal music.
3. Mundari is an Austro-Asiatic language spoken by the Munda people in the states of Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal. It has 11,28,228 speakers (2011 census). Mundari Bani, its script, was developed by Rohidas Singh Nag in 2004.
4. Santali is the most widely spoken language of the Munda sub-family of the Austro-Asiatic languages, spoken by the Santali people in the states of Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Mizoram, Odisha, Tripura, and West Bengal. It has 73,68,192 speakers (2011 census). Ol Chiki, its script, was developed by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925.
5. Ho belongs to the Munda sub-family of Austro-Asiatic languages spoken by the Ho, Kolha and Kol people in Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, and Assam. It has 10,40,000 speakers (2011 census). Its script, Warang Chiti, was invented by Dhawan Turi in the 13th century; it was modernised by Lako Bodra in the 1990s.
6. Wancho is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by 56,866 Wancho Naga people (2011 census) in the Longdeng and Tirap districts of Arunachal Pradesh, and in parts of Assam and Nagaland; some Wancho speakers are found in Myanmar and Bhutan.

Hercules Singh Munda
Founder-Director,
TriLingo-Alfred Technologies.
TLP Fellow - 2019.
Munda Tribe, Ranchi, Jharkhand.

Rural Broadcasters Take on Voice Poverty

Dr. Vinod Pavarala

There is more than one way of approaching academics. I have a dual background in sociology, and communications and media studies. When I got my PhD in the early 1990s in the US and decided to come back to India, it made sense to explore what one could do in the academia.

I joined the Communications department at the University of Hyderabad. I was also looking for something where I could contribute my knowledge of the sociological dimensions of how things work in society, the structures and the culture in which people are embedded, and how media and communication intersect with those structures. I started teaching a course on social change, on how communication can be used for developmental purposes.

At the time, All India Radio (AIR) would have experts like doctors, scientists and agronomists telling people how to farm or improve their health. It was a very top-down approach, where the masses were sought to be delivered from their ignorance by pundits, who disseminated their institutional knowledge using the media. It was virtually like propaganda broadcasting.

In the early 1990s, there was growing criticism and resistance against this model of development communication. In one-way communication, there is nothing to learn from the people. Inspired by Latin American scholars and others who spoke of a participatory, bottom-up approach, I felt this had to change. We needed to look at people as knowing, thinking subjects, not ignorant masses.

A farmer knows about the soil, climate and crops. I am not saying they know everything about agriculture. I am sure they have something to learn from the experts. But it has to be a two-way process: I will tell you what I know, and you will tell me what you know, and together we will evolve a model of knowledge. This is knowledge-sharing rather than a unilateral dissemination of ideas. I wanted us to invert the existing mode of knowledge exchange with the poor and the marginalised. That is how I got into social-change communication.

One concept that I talk about, and others have too, is voice poverty. It is not just economic poverty that the poor and marginalised suffer from, but also voice poverty that has been created and inflicted on them over a long period of time. That is, the deep inequalities in people's access to means of communication and their abilities to communicate. Voice poverty is about systematically denying people their right to communicate, which affects their right to participate in decision-making.

Community media, like community radio, is about mitigating voice poverty to some extent. In our field, we sometimes casually say that we need to give voice to the voiceless, whereas I think the problem is that no one is really voiceless; it is only that they have not been heard.

The challenge then is to build voice infrastructures to which the indigenous communities, Dalits, small farmers, and the poor will have access. That is how the community radio movement started back in the 1940s in Latin America, and more recently, in India.

Until the mid-'90s, the state controlled radio and television broadcasting. In 1995, the Supreme Court of India ruled that airwaves were public property, which must be used for public good. "Their use has to be controlled and regulated by a public authority in the interests of the public, and to prevent the invasion of their rights," said the apex court. The government interpreted this to abolish the monopoly of the state-controlled media. Thus, they started a process of auctioning off the airwaves to the private sector.

Those campaigning for greater autonomy — academics, activists, media persons — protested, stating that public property meant property of the people, not of private entities. By the late '90s, some of the larger private companies had started FM stations. There was no putting the genie back in the bottle. Since there was government radio and private radio, we pressed the government for community broadcasting, which was available in many democratic countries.

In 2003, the government issued a community radio licence to an education institution called Anna University. While campus radios were welcome, this was not the kind of community radio that we had been asking for; what we really needed was a voice for disenfranchised communities.

Many meetings and petitions later, in 2007, the government finally amended policies that permitted not only educational institutions, but also NGOs and community-based organisations to apply for community radio licences.

The DDS (Deccan Development Society) is an NGO that mainly works with the poor Dalit women of Telangana. They work with local communities in the former Medak district (now Sangareddy) on soil regeneration, food security, revival of millet crops, and women's empowerment, so that women have control over their land, food and livelihood. In the natural course of things, these marginalised people started seeking autonomy over tools of communication. The objective was to tell their own stories.

Algole Narsamma of Sangham Radio in Pastapur, Telangana.

They would see all these journalists and filmmakers coming to them, shooting, taking their stories and winning awards. One fine day these women thought: why can't we tell our own stories in our own voice? Initially, some of them learnt video, which they started using to represent their lives and talk about their issues. In the wake of the Supreme Court judgement, these women felt the need for a radio service of their own and managed to get some equipment and set up a station. But they didn't yet have a licence.

Namma Dhwani (Our Voice) was one of the early community radio projects, in Karnataka's Kolar district. They initially had no broadcast licence. So, they transmitted audio over cable TV wires. When you switched to a specific TV channel, you would get the radio service, where you would have only audio, no visuals. They entered about 300 homes in this way.

After a long wait, in 2008, the DDS women's collective became the first licensed community radio station in India. It was called Sangham Radio. Sangham means a 'collective'. The DDS works with about 5,000 women through all-women sanghams in 75 villages. It was these villages that had come together and started the station.

About a week later a second station — called Bundelkhand Radio — started in Madhya Pradesh. There are now close to 300 community radio stations in India.

As I said, before radio, the women of DDS had already started creating video reportage under their body, the Community Media Trust, Pastapur. In 2002, they became concerned with reports of suicides among cotton farmers. Several suicides from Warangal district had made it to the headlines. The women reporters decided to go there.

Bt cotton — MECH Bt-12 and MECH Bt-162 — was sold in Andhra Pradesh as Bollgard, and marketed by Mahyco-Monsanto, a multinational seed and agrochemical company. India's first genetically-modified crop, it had got the nod for commercial cultivation in south India in March 2002. Subsequently, in the cotton district of Warangal, over 200 farmers who had cultivated Bt incurred huge losses and debts and committed suicide.

This led the AP Coalition in Defence of Diversity and the DDS to initiate a study as to whether Bt cotton had really saved Warangal's farmers, as Mahyco-Monsanto had claimed. The film, 'Why Are Warangal Farmers Angry With Bt Cotton?', is part of this larger study. It brings alive the story of four farmers, and the rollercoaster experiences of others like them, who had planted Bt cotton and suffered huge losses.

The women began to film the fate of Bt cotton and documented its life cycle. Their film is a tremendously powerful document on the trauma that Bt cotton farmers experienced in 2002-2003.

The filmmakers kept going back to Warangal month after month, including the searing summers. They formed farmer focus groups, got them to share information and voice their opinion on the positive and negative impact of Bt cotton. They filmed all the interviews and observations. This was in the finest tradition of journalism where the story was born of deep and long engagement, and not just a one-shot report.

The film is a genuine representation of the experience of Warangal's Bt cotton farmers. Through its sheer authenticity, this film nails the deceitful propaganda of the biotech industry and reveals the dangers of genetically-engineered crops for small-scale, dryland farmers.

It was well-received internationally. It was also dubbed in several languages and was used in Africa, Indonesia and other countries in their campaign against Bt cotton.

Coming back to radio, while it is an expensive proposition, it has been a great medium for the poor for multiple reasons. One is that our indigenous and farming communities have a fantastic storytelling tradition, so they take to the radio very easily without much training.

While they may not have smartphones and TV, many of them still own radios. Some carry transistor radios, some have it on their phones. Farmers put on the radio while farming. They have it dangling from the cycle handlebar. There is a whole radio culture that exists across rural India. The radio is important to people who live on the fringes of the development road. Even in remote areas where there are no phones or electricity, there are radios. This is true in many parts of the world.

Also, the people producing the programmes are very close to the community, and from the community. The programmes are made in partnership with community members, in the local language and dialect. With the growth of community radio, you could hear languages like Kutchi, Bundeli, and Telangana Telugu. Otherwise, the constitutionally recognised languages were all you heard.

Today there are radio stations that broadcast in indigenous tongues of Santali and Sahariya too, evoking a great deal of identity pride. This way, we may even be able to revive languages that are dying. Some reports suggest that almost 40 percent of the estimated 6,000-odd languages of the world are at risk of disappearing. Community radio may help stem that loss.

Further, community radio is important because mainstream media does not devote space and time to such voices. For a people, it is important to be able to talk (and be heard) about climate change, education, language, culture, their forests and water, to have access and control over their own resources.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, vital information about masking, physical distancing, and other precautions was communicated effectively in local and hyperlocal languages over community radios. Community elders would come on air and tell people what they needed to do. Though doctors would also advise, having the elders speak helped. Later, as vaccination started, these stations have played a critical role in persuading people to get inoculated.

On the whole, the slow growth of community radios in India has been quite disappointing. In the last 15 years we have created only 300 stations; in a country as vast as India, that is a drop in the ocean. We should have at least 3,000-4,000 community radio stations.

My dream is to travel the length and breadth of the country, and to be able to, every few kilometres, catch a new community radio station,

speaking and singing in a different language, unveiling a different part of our vibrant cultural canvas.

I have been advocating allocation of public funds for community radio in India. It has been successfully done in countries like Australia, UK, Ireland, and Canada. Some of us have also been suggesting that a tiny part of the ₹60,000-crore Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) — a resource to bridge the digital divide — be used to expand the voice infrastructures for the poor and marginalised, and allow their voices to be heard.

The government says you can sell airtime to advertisers and raise funds. But imagine if you are broadcasting in Santali language in remote areas of Purulia district of West Bengal, who is going to advertise? The indigenous communities that constitute the listenership of that station are the wrong kind of consumers for most advertisers.

(As told to Mritunjay Kumar)

Professor Vinod Pavarala is Senior Professor of Communications and former Dean of the Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication at the University of Hyderabad. He also heads the UNESCO Chair on Community Media, set up at the university by UNESCO in 2011. The Chair is involved in research, policy advocacy, knowledge-sharing, and capacity building.

For almost two decades, Pavarala has been one of the leading campaigners for democratisation of radio airwaves in India and has played a significant role in drafting the national policy on community radio.

Of Building Digital Bridges: For and By Indigenous People

Osama Manzar

I was addressing an auditorium full of bright young people in an Indian metropolis — the conversation, if I may call it that, was about the digital divide. At some point, the matter of facilitating tribal communities to bridge the digital divide came up and I posed a query to the audience. I asked them: while much has been said about how to help them bridge this divide, a more fundamental question has been ignored — why should we help them bridge the divide? The audience seemed perplexed and most, if not all, answers were on the lines of, "So that they can become like us".

Sadly, this discourse is not restricted to just the general layperson. It can be found in the best of us — people involved with nonprofits, bureaucrats, and politicians. Why should tribal communities have access to the information, protection of intellectual property, participation in the public square that the internet offers? To borrow from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

There are certain rights inherent in every human being by birth. There are other rights guaranteed by multilateral charters. For instance, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) deals with the rights of indigenous people.

Article 13(1) of UNDRIP says, "Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons." Article 16(1) adds, "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination."

I also want to draw attention to Article 31 (1) of the same charter: "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

"(2.) In conjunction with indigenous peoples, States shall take effective measures to recognise and protect the exercise of these rights".

There is a sentence in the preamble of the UNDRIP which answers the 'Why' I asked better than any other and is also a good beginning to any attempt at answering the 'How' — "Affirming that indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples, while recognising the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such."

Indigenous communities deserve to overcome information inequality not so that they can become like non-tribals, not so that their unique identities, cultures, languages, and trades can be replaced by those of non-tribals, but so that they, their languages, their cultures can continue to exist. 'Information poverty' is the result of information exclusion and information discrimination. Both discrimination and exclusion can happen as the result of deliberate acts and also because of negligence.

One of the things at the centre of any human experience, whether as individuals or in groups, is what we call language. Language isn't only a tool to convey thoughts from one person to another, it is history and memory, it is political power, it is livelihood. One of the chief aspects of information inequality that indigenous communities experience is the threat to their languages. To preserve their history and culture (information), people need to record and preserve their language.

According to many estimates, approximately 200 languages are endangered in India, the degree of threat as classified by UNESCO ranging from "vulnerable" to "critically endangered". Literary critic and activist Ganesh Devy, who conducted the Linguistic Survey of India in 2010, told The Indian Express that out of 780 languages in India, 600 are dying.

Insofar as languages are concerned, the task is two-fold. First, enabling communities to record and preserve their language. This task isn't as simple as recording the alphabets and words, even though that is a significant part of it. As Devy points out in his conversation with The Indian Express, preserving a language also means creating livelihood opportunities which can be accessed in that language. The second part of the task involves making available existing information on the internet and elsewhere in the language of the community. Priority here will have to be given to public welfare services — an area where the government will have to do all of the work.

Individuals, non-profit organisations and in some cases even governments are making efforts to protect languages. Chhattisgarh Net Voice or CGNet Swara, an organisation founded by Shubhranshu Chaudhary, a former BBC journalist, provides a service wherein indigenous people can call a phone number, and get or give news about

A digital literacy programme set up by the Digital Empowerment Foundation.

the developments affecting them in four languages — Gondi, Kudukh, Chhattisgarhi and Hindi. One of the pioneers in India who has done and continues to do much for this cause is an individual named Subhashish Panigrahi. In a piece for The Wire, Panigrahi discusses the various open-source software that create pronunciation libraries. In the same piece he also points to the work being done by organisations such as the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, an organisation which has done extraordinary work to preserve the Munda group of languages and the Hruso Aka language in India. The Wikimedia Foundation is also making excellent efforts across the world in this direction. In Canada it has helped preserve the Atikamekw Nehiromowin language .

The Odisha government, for one, has been taking a mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTBMLE) approach in educating communities.

Insofar as culture is concerned, the work by Adiwasi Janjagruti is an excellent example of the approach that needs to be taken. Among many other things that they do, the organisation trains individuals to shoot and edit videos. From this point onwards, the process of culture preservation begins automatically — people record their rituals, important events in their lives, and so on. There are similar efforts across the world. Mari Correa has been working in the Amazon Rainforest enabling communities to make movies about their stories and culture. In a conversation with Landscape News, she brings forth an important point. When asked, why the emphasis on indigenous people making their own films, she says, "The gaze from outside is important as long as it doesn't substitute the gaze from inside. It's a gaze where you transform. There were various dimensions in making films in the communities. They themselves always say, 'We want to show ourselves to the society that envelops us, but also in the way we see ourselves, not the way they want to see us'. This desire is for a dialogue from their point of view, not only the person portraying them."

For preserving culture, a delicate balance has to be reached between enabling communities and stepping aside on one hand, and continuous involvement by outsiders — the government, private enterprise, and civil society — on the other. Organisers of festivals where art is celebrated — whether it is cinema or similar initiatives — need to walk the extra mile to ensure that endangered cultures find sufficient representation and participation.

The north star as far as private initiative in this field is concerned remains the work being done by Tata Steel Foundation, inter-alia, in Jharkhand. Samvaad, a cultural festival organised by the company, brings together tribal communities not only across India, but across the world. Movies, handicraft, food, and other things that constitute tribal culture are shared and celebrated in this festival. Fellowships covering the promotion and preservation of indigenous culture, livelihood and language are awarded. The spectrum these fellowships cover is amply demonstrated by one glance at the list of awardees in 2020:

1. Deepa Pawar from the Gadiya Lohar tribe for the project on the Documentation of Traditional Art of Iron Weapons and Toolmaking of the Gadiya Lohar.
2. Taukeer Alam from the Van Gujjar tribe for the project on Mari Birsa (Our Heritage), an Initiative to Conserve the Language of the Van Gujjar.
3. Bibtha S. from the Kadar tribe for the project on the Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage of the Kadar Community.
4. Lalremruata Ngamlai from the Biate tribe for the project on the Documentation of Biate Indigenous Sports and Exploring its Role in the Cultural Revival & Preservation of the Tribe.
5. Ariba Anar from the Sangtam tribe for the project on the Revival of Folk Songs and Folklore of the Sangtam Tribe.
6. K. Bowang Kho from the Poumai Naga tribe for the project to Reclaim the Past and Empower the Present: Pouli (The Earthen Pot of Onaeme).

There can be no substitute for hard financial investment from the government. A report in The Economic Times tells us that only 18 percent of tribal students have access to online education. The Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), an organisation I founded, has invested a lot of effort in this direction. For example, the DEF worked with the Sahariya Tribe in Rajasthan, and established a 200-kilometre Community Network; it is an alternative methodology to frugally connect to the internet in remote areas; the operations are largely set up and managed by the community. This has enabled the tribe to not only create a localised database of their cultural heritage but also to interact with the rest of the world.

While there is a tremendous need to provide gadgets and 4G/broadband access, there is a simultaneous need to train personnel to adopt culture-sensitive pedagogy: teachers, bureaucrats, and other administrative personnel need to be trained on a large scale and with urgency. The North America specific Indigenous Connectivity Summit goes a step ahead and inter-alia, recommends:

1. "….Non-Indigenous Internet Service Providers should receive training, cultural education information, and other community-critical information from the community regarding sacred sites, norms, etc. prior to deploying the service.
2. Partnerships should be encouraged both between Indigenous and non-Indigenous entities as well as between Indigenous communities.
3. Indigenous peoples should be commissioned to provide guidance to government agencies, committees, and representative bodies should increase the number of salaried Indigenous staff to provide guidance and insight into all policy processes impacting Indigenous areas.
4. An Indigenous Broadband Fund and centralised database that captures funding opportunities, eligibility, and information on how to apply should be created.

In the domain of training, the DEF has worked with Facebook India and Niti Aayog (the Central government's policy think tank) to create an urban-rural mentoring programme called Going Online As Leaders, or GOAL. In this programme, women in rural and tribal communities are trained in digital literacy, leadership qualities, advocacy skills and much more by eminent women from urban areas. In its pilot stage alone, 40 young tribal women were successfully trained in the Betul district of Madhya Pradesh. The programme has since reached hundreds of women across several states.

There is so much more to do, including the need for provision of quality legal advice to tribal communities so that they are not exploited, and an urgent need to train lawyers from among the community. I will however conclude now with one final message — tribal communities can address information deprivation, if only we let them.

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The Digital Empowerment Foundation helped establish a 200-kilometre Community Network for the Sahariya tribe in Rajasthan. The network is based on an alternative methodology to frugally connect to the internet in remote areas. The operations are largely set up and managed by the community.

Osama Manzar is founder and director of the Digital Empowerment Foundation. He is an Ashoka Senior Fellow, who has served on various boards like the Association for Affordable Internet, Association for Progressive Communications, and government bodies. He has played a key role in creating and implementing some of the biggest policies of the country, like the National Digital Literacy Mission, Going Online As Leaders (GOAL), PM-WANI and Common Service Centres.

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The Making of the Tribal Budget

Sudhakar David

I am 63. Until my late 40s, I didn't know about my roots entirely. I knew I was a Dalit[1] and lived the consequences of that identity. But for chance, I would have never discovered the whole truth.

In 2007, I accompanied a friend to a village near the temple town of Tirupati in Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh, where he was working on mitigating tensions between the Dalits (Scheduled Castes or SCs) and the Yanadis. Yanadis are a large adivasi (Scheduled Tribes or STs) group, who live in Nellore, Chittoor and Kadapa districts. Originally, many of them were concentrated on the Sriharikota barrier island. In 1970-1971, the entire island population, Yanadis and non-Yanadis alike, were displaced so India could develop a satellite launching facility. The evicted Yanadis settled down in the above-mentioned districts — in villages adjoining forests — following their old pattern of semi-nomadic forest subsistence.

In the village I visited with my friend, I saw them being marginalised and oppressed by the Dalits, who themselves fight oppression. It was complicated to understand victims also as perpetrators; much as it saddened me, it changed my approach to work related to human rights.

However, it is the other revelation that was more provoking. I met an old Yanadi woman who looked almost exactly like my maternal grandmother. Unable to let go, I went back to my mother's village at the foot of the Seshachalam forest-hills, 70 kilometres away. My grandmother was no more, but after some investigation I could firmly establish that my roots are in the Yanadis.

SC and ST Budgets

Dalit organisations are very strong in the Telugu-speaking states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana; they are substantially supported by the Dappu Collective[2] and the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR).

I had joined the NCDHR to assist Dalit human rights monitoring projects, which gave me the opportunity to understand Dalits civil rights particularly in the context of economic rights. I also worked at ActionAid India's Dalit policy desk. Additionally, I got assignments to assist the adivasi desk of the Centre for World Solidarity in Hyderabad in evolving the Adivasi Development Initiative (ADI).

These experiences led me to join the People's Monitoring Committee (PMC), a platform for NGOs lobbying district and state-level officials for just execution of Dalit and adivasi rights conferred under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)[3]. My job was to analyse data from the MGNREGS website and prepare notes for advocacy. This became my first exposure to government budget allocations, expenditures, deviations, and the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG)[4] reports.

During 2010-2011, Dalit and adivasi leaders in Telugu-speaking states started to demand legal status for the Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan (SCSP) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), also called the Scheduled Tribes Component. The National Dalit Forum (NDF), Hyderabad, started analysing governance allocations, expenditures, and diversions under the SCSP and TSP. To prepare ground for the demand for legal status, I was tasked with preparing advocacy notes. I concentrated on analysing allocations of the governments of states where the NDF was working at that time. The NDF started similar initiatives in Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha. The demand was supported by NGOs, activists, retired bureaucrats, journalists, and one of the Communist parties.

The Congress Party, which was in power in Andhra Pradesh and the Centre, conceded the demand with an eye on the 2014 national elections — to divert attention from the issue of separate statehood for the region of Telangana, and to win Dalit and adivasi votes. The Andhra Pradesh government formed a cabinet committee to take this forward. The committee held district-level consultations and submitted its report, and the state assembly enacted the Andhra Pradesh SCSP and TSP (Planning, Allocation, and Utilisation of Financial Resources) Act, 2013. On behalf of the NDF, I became part of the team which prepared drafts of the legislation and analysed it after its enactment.

How were SC and ST Budgets Analysed

NCDHR was one of the organisations that had demanded separate budget codes for SCSP and TSP. The Union government had allotted code 789 for SCSP and 796 for TSP. Budget analysis of SCSP and TSP became easier with these codes, which are used in the Union and state budgets.

Also, SCSP and TSP were presented as separate budget volumes. In the Andhra Pradesh budget, volume VII/2 TSP and volume VII/3 SCSP were presented. But, there were no separate volumes in the Union budget.

State-Level Analysis of Budget Allocations

The budget volumes give details of accounts of the previous and the

current budget, the budget estimate for the current year, revised estimates of the current year, and budgetary allocations for the coming year. These details are given ministry-wise or department-wise or scheme-wise, or account head-wise. Details of the department-wise physical and financial targets are available on the TSP website.

Under the TSP, we find the budget estimates (refer table below), provisions, and expenditure during 2014-2021. It shows that except for one year, the unutilised budget ranges from 19.46 percent to 47.53 percent. The total unutilised amount over seven years is ₹9,334.11 crore. And, of the total schemes, up to 23.54 percent had zero utilisation.

Expenditure analysis is more complicated as the accounts in Volume VII/2 mostly do not tally with the financial reports of the TSP. The expenditure stated by the treasury for April-September is subject to adjustments, as is the April-March expenditure. The final expenditure reported by the State Council for Development of STs gives the adjusted figure.

Panchayat-Level Analysis

Till 2018, the Union Panchayati Raj made the budgets of Gram Panchayats, Block Panchayats, and District Panchayats available in the public domain. These had details of allocations under the TSP. But now this is not shared.

Evolution of the TSP

The TSP has been in force since 1974, to ensure adequate flow of plan resources for the development of the STs. It saw the creation of robust institutions like the Integrated Tribal Development Project Agency (ITDA)[5]. To that effect, adivasi-majority blocks in the country were identified during the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-1979), and notified during the Sixth (1980-1985).

The TSP's objective is to allocate government resources. Funds earmarked under the TSP had to be at least in proportion to the ST population of a state or territory. Union ministries had to provide funds in proportion to the ST population.

The need for focused planning for the development of adivasis has a long history. Even before Independence, several committees were constituted to study and recommend effective processes for adivasi development. Constitutional commitments prompted policymakers and planners to prioritise the development of the STs right from the dawn of the country's developmental planning in 1951.

1. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) appointed the Dr. Verrier Elwin Committee in 1959. The committee submitted its report in 1960, in which it observed that the schematic budget has in practice proved an obstacle to the adoption of the programme to adivasi needs. Although the state governments have been empowered to reallocate funds from one head to another within the same block in any manner they consider necessary to meet local requirements, this has not been used with sufficient imagination and knowledge. The schematic budget tends to set a rigid pattern, which results in lopsided expenditure.
2. The MHA constituted a Special Working Group under the chairmanship of M. P. Bhargava in 1961 to study the development of backward classes, particularly STs. It stated that "...No systematic and planned attempts have so far been made in the tribal areas... due to the structural weaknesses, operational defects, management problems and faulty procedures".
3. An advisory committee was constituted in 1965 under the chairmanship of B. N. Lokur, which noted that all the adivasis in the schedule were not the same.
4. The same year a high-level committee was constituted under the leadership of M. T. Raju. He suggested equitable distribution of community development funds so that existing imbalances were removed.
5. The First Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission headed by U. N. Dhebar had observed that "the task that confronted the framers of the Constitution was... to devise a suitable formula which would protect the economic interests of the tribals, safeguard their way of life, and ensure their development so that they might take their legitimacy in the general life of the country".
6. As per the Dhebar Committee report, the Andhra Pradesh government had instructed that 3 percent of the total provision of each department should be earmarked for the welfare of STs.
7. P. Shilu Ao, chairman of the study team on Tribal Development Programmes, stated that "...progress was to be achieved not by attempting to transform them overnight... into carbon copies of the sophisticated plainsmen", but by a process of growth.
8. Set up by the Planning Commission under the chairmanship of

TSP Budget Trends for 2014-2021 (Amount in ₹ Crores)

Financial Year	Number of Schemes under TSP	Budget Estimate	Total Provision	Expenditure	Unspent	% of Expenditure over Total Provision	Number of Schemes with zero expenditure	% of schemes with zero expenditure
2014 -15	255	1,387.83	1,832.07	1,956.99	-124.92	106.82	24	9.41
2015 -16	180	1,686.60	2,173.69	1,750.64	423.05	80.54	21	11.67
2016 -17	212	3,099.95	3,593.22	2,446.75	1,146.47	68.09	44	20.75
2017 -18	215	3,528.74	4,265.36	3,356.10	909.26	78.68	29	13.49
2018 -19	238	4,176.60	5,331.29	3,537.91	1,793.38	66.36	56	23.53
2019 -20	241	4,988.52	5,804.29	3,740.24	2,064.05	64.44	63	26.14
2020 -21	214	5,177.53	6,570.16	3,447.34	3,122.82	52.47	52	24.30
Total		**24,045.77**	**29,570.08**	**20,235.97**	**9,334.11**	**68.43**		

Professor L. P. Vidyarthi, in 1972, the Task Force on the Development of Tribal Areas observed that "various services offered by functionaries engaged in both regulatory and development work will need to be integrated. A policy of integrated development for tribals may be emphasised for the Fifth Five-Year Plan".

9. The Union Ministry of Education constituted an expert committee under the chairmanship of Dr. S. C. Dube to take a fresh look at the adivasi communities, review the development strategy, and define the comprehensive national efforts needed to make adivasis equal partners in all spheres of national life.
10. The P. S. Appu Committee made recommendations regarding debt relief, land alienation and restoration in adivasi areas.
11. The R. N. Haldipur Committee recommended a single line of administration for adivasi areas. The K. S. Bhawa Committee recommended certain administrative arrangements for effective programme implementation in adivasi areas.
12. The Maheswar Prasad Committee suggested that plans be built bottom-up on the basis of block plans, and should be an integral part of the planning chain at district, division and state levels.
13. The B. Sivaraman Committee stated that administrative unpreparedness is an important constraint in the utilisation of resources.

The Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-1978) marked a shift in the approach. The TSP stipulated that Central and state government funds should be quantified on the basis of the proportional ST population, with budgetary mechanisms to ensure accountability, non-divertibility, and proper utilisation for the welfare and development of STs.

Underutilisation of the TSP Funds

Increase in funds has not generally meant better socio-economic outcomes for adivasi populations for a variety of reasons. Foremost is the fact that the majority of them are not particularly vocal, have been traditionally disadvantaged, and dwell in remote places. In addition to the problems of physical access, the absence of functionaries and a link language are serious barriers. As a result, the money allocated for their wellbeing lapses and is transferred to non-adivasis in the subsequent financial year.

Former President K. R. Narayanan appointed a committee of governors under the chairmanship of P. C. Alexander in 2000, to study inadequacies in the implementation of programmes meant for the welfare of SCs and STs. The committee observed that "funds allocated for Dalits and tribals under special plans are not at all satisfactory. Efforts are on to either divert or reduce even these nominal funds that are allocated".

A Task Force was set up in 2010 to review the implementation guidelines for SCSP and TSP under the chairmanship of Dr. Narendra Jadav. The Task Force observed that, "Implementation of the above guidelines has remained inadequate. Hardly any ministry is showing its SCSP/ TSP outlays under a separate budget head. Some ministries are showing a notional earmarking, but the criterion followed in doing so is not uniform and transparent. Also, in the absence of this outlay being shown under a separate minor head (789 or 796, as the case may be), such notional earmarking does not have much significance, nor is its non-divertibility ensured…"

The National Advisory Council (NAC) reviewed the implementation of the SCSP and TSP and observed that the formulation and implementation of the sub-plans have been deficient and fallen short of meeting their objectives both at the Centre and in the states.

The NAC proposed fresh guidelines for SCSP and TSP implementation, including an institutional framework with detailed roles and responsibilities for effective planning, allocation, utilisation, monitoring, and transparency. This was viewed as a paradigm shift from 'accounting' to 'planning' SCSP and TSP.

The CAG report on state and Union budgets and their utilisation have been very critical of the same. There has been the Delhi government's diversion of nearly ₹750 crore of SCSP funds for the Commonwealth Games, the Andhra Pradesh government building of flyovers with SCSP funds, and hundreds of others highlighted by media and civil society organisations.

For instance, the CAG report on the Andhra Pradesh TSP for the year 2013-14 revealed that none of the ITDAs had prepared long-term perspectives plans as stipulated. Between 2009 and 2014, the average TSP outlay was 3.97 percent as against 6.60 percent provided for in the budget. Out of ₹10,837 crore allocated during this period, the utilisation was ₹6,721 crore. The Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Tribes Cooperative Finance Corporation Limited utilised around 50 percent of its budget and covered about 50 percent of its target beneficiaries during 2009-2014.

There are 4,737 scheduled villages and 553 non-scheduled villages with 47 percent to 88 percent adivasi population. But there is hardly any effort to analyse the TSP at the Gram Panchayat, block or district level. To address this, the Centre for Rural Studies and Development (CRSD) has initiated TSP and SCSP monitoring by civil society organisations.

But the training on budget analysis and advocacy was limited to Dalit organisations and activists. There were hardly any organisations headed by adivasis. Adivasi representatives were mostly illiterate or semi-literate and found it hard to understand budget codes and budget volumes. The analysis of TSP was limited to state budgets, and advocacy with the state finance minister and MLAs during budget sessions. Dalit organisations, however, could take up advocacy at the district level with the District Collector, project director, and officers of the Scheduled Caste Finance Corporation.

The activities of the CRSD ended with the project. While some of the Dalit organisations and activists who were trained continue to raise their voice, you hardly hear the adivasis.

The TSP and Gram Panchayats

Participatory budgeting at the local government level gained momentum in the 1990s and resulted in the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. This amendment was promulgated to enable state legislatures to endow the Gram Panchayats with such powers as may be necessary to function as institutions of self-government; such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Gram Panchayats at the appropriate level.

Participatory budgeting aligns public expenditure with the priorities of the citizens, namely children's education.

With the amendment, Panchayats can act as independent bodies and make plans for social and economic development. It has provided sufficient representation for adivasis and Dalits. With adequate devolution of powers and financial resources, the Panchayats are required to formulate and implement the budget to achieve holistic social and economic development of its people.

The Constitution of India contains exhaustive provisions for the protection and promotion of the interests of the STs. These mandatory safeguards are relevant in the context of implementation of provisions of the TSP and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, for streamlining the administrative apparatus, providing legal support, and implementing developmental programmes.

Article 275(1) provides for the payment of a grant-in-aid to enable states to meet the cost of such developmental schemes as may be undertaken with the Union government's approval for the welfare of the STs, or to improve the administration of the Scheduled Areas.

Article 243G provides that the state legislature may, by law, endow the Panchayats with such authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government, and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibility upon Panchayats. This provision enables Gram Panchayats to prepare plans and implement schemes for economic development and social justice. But this is rarely the case in practice.

Rise of Participatory Budgets

Participatory budgeting has been highly successful in Brazil. The positive impact of participatory budgeting was evident in the improved quality and accessibility of various public welfare amenities in the municipalities where it was adopted.

The participation and influence of people belonging to low-income groups in the budget allocation process are proof of their empowerment. Participatory budgeting began in Brazil in 1989 and by 2013 this kind of budgeting was found in more than 2,500 municipalities worldwide. It was successful in Kenya too.

Participatory budgeting in Kenya has increased opportunities for women and remote communities to take part in expenditure prioritisation, as budget allocation was aligned with citizens' priorities. This framework also compelled elected members to participate in the discussions, enabled swift approvals, and minimised changes in the budget.

There are several examples of people's participation for Panchayat development in India as well. The People's Plan Campaign of Kerala has brought about phenomenal changes in governance at the grassroots level over the last 25 years. A quick look will demonstrate the spectacular achievements of the plan in public health, education, and other sectors. From a mere 28 percent of the people relying on public health institutions in 1991, it went up to 38 percent in 2014, and reached 48 percent just before the onset of the pandemic.

The quality of public education has also improved. While government schools taught around 1.5 lakh children in 1991, the figure went up to 4.1 lakh in 2016-2017. People below the poverty line came down from 25 percent to 1 percent between 1993 and 2016.

Epilogue

During 2009, I helped Yanadis living in Krishnapatnam block of Nellore district, close to the Bay of Bengal. A seaport was developed; the Yanadis were the worst-affected and were even excluded from the Relief, Rehabilitation and Resettlement package. One of my friends got a project to capacitate Yanadis; it was supported by a Swedish donor agency. I studied the issues and prepared the plans, which were supported between 2009 and 2019. I was even invited to travel in Europe to create awareness on Yanadis and their displacement by the Krishnapatnam Port Project, and later the Krishnapatnam Ultra Mega Thermal Power Project. The fight against marginalisation continues, in budget implementations as in everyday life.

References

1. Dalit or Scheduled Caste (as it is officially referred to in the Constitution) is a term given in India to the lowest social strata in orthodox Hindu hegemony. They are among the most disadvantaged peoples to this day.
2. Dappu (a drum) is an exclusively Dalit sound and Dalit music. It is a symbol of assertion. The Dappu Collective is an agitational mass organisation that played a key role in the Telangana Movement.
3. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), an Indian legislation enacted on August 25, 2005, provides a legal guarantee for 100 days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do public work-related unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage.
4. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) is an authority whose prime responsibility is to audit the government's receipts and expenditure, including the entities that are funded by the government.
5. Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) is an additional institution for delivery of public goods and services to Scheduled Tribes. It is a Central government sponsored scheme, overseen by the respective states.

Sudhakar David's social work goes back four decades, from the time he was in college. He has been contributing research reports to Dalit and adivasi movements and organisations, and has helped shape significant legislations that improve their lives.

David has provided study support in many key social and developmental projects. He has been involved in Covid-19 relief efforts as part of the Andhra-Telangana State Social Service Forum.

Building Root Bridges

Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz

By the time a man realises that maybe his father was right, he usually has a son who thinks his father is wrong.

— Pianist Charles Wadsworth

Recently I conducted a social experiment with my new batch of students, most of whom are from indigenous communities in Jharkhand. For their induction ceremony, I asked them to bring their parents along.

The low level of aspiration among indigenous students and their weakening ties with their roots has always bothered me. Once they pass out of school and enter the university education system, full of energy and adolescent adrenalin they get carried away by the usual distractions of college. The possibility of them getting lured into unhealthy practices has been found to be higher. Adult guidance in this transition period is crucial. Except, even though the parents are concerned, they don't intervene because they are intimidated by the changes in their ward. It results in a deep communication gap.

The idea of inviting the parents to the induction ceremony was to create an interface with teachers; slowly this could evolve as a place to understand how the gap can be minimised.

I gave the parents a form to fill out. There were four-five basic questions. They had to mention one impressive quality of their ward and one issue that needed immediate attention and rectification. During the day, I had observed that the children were covertly instructing their parents to fill out the forms with positive feedback. On reading the forms, I could see that the majority of parents had expressed only appreciation for their children; the responses were highly fabricated.

This is not a new experience for me. I have observed, time and again, that many children of the tribal society easily persuade their parents with their stubborn attitude. They deceive the parents equally easily. Of course, this is a general observation.

In the case of many of my students, the parents are the first generation to have stepped out of their villages. Their struggles to build a new life must have called for immense sacrifices. (My own mother Mohbait Baxla was barefoot when she first arrived in Ranchi to pursue her higher education at Nirmala College. She went on to head the Department of Geography in Ranchi University.) Naturally, they don't want their children to experience the same hardships. So, they protect them, and even refrain from exposing them to the tribal way of life. The children grow up reluctant, even ashamed, to be identified as indigenous. As a result, while the whole world is looking towards the tribal society for answers to its most critical crises, the tribal youth are looking elsewhere.

Our children should not be forced to relive the hardships we have faced. That would be absurd. But we have a responsibility to expose them to the indigenous way of life right from the start, so that they learn the mother tongue spontaneously, imbibe the indigenous knowledge systems, understand the intricate relationship we have with our jal-jangal-jameen (water-forest-land), and know how to truly live as a community. This will strengthen their sense of identity and belonging.

At present, the forces of modernisation and urbanisation are negating the richness and diversity of tribal life. This does not imply that one should return to one's native place, to the ancient ways, to fulfil the pursuit. What we need is a blend of tribal values and knowledge systems and modernity.

The Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) reflects the distinct way of life of a people. It is the story of their struggle with Nature and how they survived the challenges; it illustrates their success in relation to their particular environment. They did not abuse their environment, rather made it a part of their life; it was essential for their wellbeing. The knowledge that he acquired in due course helped fulfil his needs.

This experiential knowledge was passed on from generation to generation. Knowledge transferred orally, it became rooted in songs, fables, folktales, and idioms of tribal society. The knowledge does not belong to an individual but to the whole society. It may be specific to a particular community, informed by their struggle, and may include their own social and cultural insights. No matter how much our lifestyle has changed today, it will be imprudent to ignore wisdom accumulated over thousands of years.

The world is grappling with multiple crises. Whether it is the United Nations or the International Council of Science, all have emphasised that if the world is to be saved from a great tragedy, then the pertinence and application of IKS has to be understood. In this age where science has maintained its salience by explaining cause and effect, the verification of IKS through a scientific lens is essential.

In order to establish the IKS as a systemic and scientific body of knowledge, there is a requirement for pressure groups at various levels. At the political level, appropriate legislative initiatives are required to ensure that IKS is recognised as a knowledge system beneficial for humanity. At the level of cultural institutions, promotion, and participation have to be ensured. In education and health, the benefits of IKS need to

be enumerated, along with the socio-economic opportunities. Some of the cultural practices ingrained within IKS, such as a greater degree of gender parity, needs to be adopted.

There remain several barriers to the complete adoption of IKS to prevent political practices that lead to incidents such as territorial displacement, forced migration, and deforestation, which might eventually lead to a complete loss of the knowledge systems.

However, if the younger generation of tribal scholars are able to assert the validity of the IKS through adequate research, it could be better that it was born of deep and long engagement, and not just a one-shot report. There is an increasing urgency to document and preserve the diversity of IKS. First and foremost, one should focus on recording the oral history and traditions in which the nuances of IKS are embedded. To a great extent, technological assistance can accelerate the process of documentation. Introducing the vitality of IKS in the primary and high school curriculum at an early stage will revive it.

In anthropology, an all-inclusive approach is very important. When we conduct a holistic study, we try to look at a community from every angle. In tribal societies, we can see it in relation to its fauna, land, water, forest, environment, natural events, disasters, and geographical situations. Tribal communities have efficiently managed natural resources through history; they have learned how to deal with different animals, they have learned which tree and plant to include in the food chain. Cultural rules and prohibitions have ensured that natural resources are used sparingly. The indigenous people know which animal conceives at what time, because in animals it is often seasonal, and hunting those animals during that period is barred. This also applies to plants, which are beneficial to the health of the community because the right time to consume natural produce is aligned with its life cycle. Some of the fish they catch are released back into the water, which assures the proliferation and availability of fish. Sustainability, as we aspire for, is enshrined within tribal traditions.

Collectivism holds special importance in indigenous communities. There are many in-depth observational methods by which the community predicts the year's climate. Accordingly, they decide which resources to conserve, which to consume, and how much. These societies work on

My son Aiwan was invited to address the Global Ingenious Youth Forum 2021, organised by the United Nations Food Summit. He spoke on the traditional system of preservation of seeds and chemical-free farming that is practised in our villages.

the principle of necessity, not greed. We ridicule anti-consumerism and minimalism, but we too need to reflect on the speed and manner in which we are consuming.

Gerontocracy once was a strong tribal system wherein the elders of the family were respected and revered. Their decisions were considered supreme. Elders always had a deep connection with children and grandchildren. Their bedtime stories were our first moral science classes. These stories were also a rich source of the community's oral history. Gerontocracy is dying now.

Hailing from the Oraon tribe of central India and a regular visitor to the countryside, I have witnessed the nuances of the IKS closely. Even today, my village sustains itself largely on resources that are located in its environment. Villagers continue to practise the traditional method of farming, utilising the cultivation inputs sustainably.

My father was a professor of chemistry. He taught us about indigenous practices during school vacations which we spent in the village. This naturally prompted me to learn my mother tongue Kurukh, while also observing and absorbing our traditional wisdom. The unbroken contact with my land has nurtured my indigenous identity and pride. I have passed it on to my sons.

When I interacted with the tribal parents at the induction ceremony, I found them to be largely unaware of their children's goals in life. As a common observation, the first-generation working parents I have met over the years are highly ignorant about the activities and accomplishments of their children. This is quite natural since they also lacked academic supervision during their childhood. They take pride in being self-made. But they should be alert when it concerns the academics and career of their children, who have grown up differently. The resolution to wake up very early, as is the practice in indigenous societies, requires discipline and sacrifice. Teaching children early on to sit with books consistently and develop a reading habit institutionalises a knowledge bank within them. Addiction to electronic gadgets and games may be countered with this method.

My student Suchit once shared a photo of his son on social media. Suchit and his wife, also a student, wake up at five in the morning and study together. His son wakes up along with them and watches them. Slowly he takes out his books and gets down to study.

Visit your native place intermittently. Let the children experience privation. Connect them with their grandparents. Let them explore Nature. This exercise will help inculcate an understanding of indigenousness and its importance in our times. This exercise has to be continuous. I am highly optimistic that it will make our children and young adults true stakeholders in our common dreams.

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A Travelling Gondwana

Kranthi Kiran Sodem

An aboriginal saying goes: Traveller, there are no paths; paths are made by walking. My grandfather, Sodem Gangulu, was the first person from our village — China Jedipudi in Eluru district of Andhra Pradesh — to go to school. My father was the first government employee. My younger sister, the first doctor.

For four decades, my grandfather was the village headman. He was also the tribal representative of the Panchayat till 1986. He played an active role in major negotiations and decisions related to land rights. No surprises there that he was the first tribesman from the village to fight for our lands in court.

We are the Koya or Gond people, the second largest tribe in India. As per the last census, we have a population of 12 million or 1.2 crore. The tribal group lives across a contiguous region in nine states — sizable parts of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Jharkhand, and Odisha, with smaller footprints in Karnataka, West Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. This region was once called Gondwana — a land of indigenous peoples, where Gondi kings reigned between the 14th and the 18th centuries. We lack a uniform socio-cultural identity. We speak different mainstream languages in different states. However, we all speak some variation of Gondi, an unwritten language of the Dravidian family.

Before I began to work for tribal rights, I had worked for two years with an MNC in Hyderabad, and for a year with the government on a contractual basis. When I came back to my village, I started looking for a government job. I was asked to produce a local Scheduled Tribe (ST) certificate; it accords tribal people reservations in education, jobs, and welfare schemes. Even after submitting all the documents at the revenue office, my application was rejected. I was told that because my family had shifted to a nearby town on account of my father's job, I did not qualify for the said certificate. When I prodded further, I learnt that the law qualifies any applicant whose family or ancestors are recognised as a tribe in any Scheduled Area, prior to January 1956. My ancestors and family were recognised as members of an indigenous community in a Scheduled Area, and we even owned ancestral property.

I thought: What if it wasn't just me? What if others were also being misinformed and turned away? There are thousands of instances of ST jobs being sold to people with fake certificates. A little bit of sleuthing with my friends confirmed my doubts. I decided to take on the revenue office.

We joined forces with local groups working for indigenous rights. We also met Kovvasi Srinivasa Rao, a government fire officer and the leader of an indigenous employees' union. He suggested that we fight with the help of the law. We started by filing Right to Information[1] (RTI) applications. We also reported corrupt officials.

Around this time, I heard about Kaki Madhu, a Koya leader who had founded the Adivasi Sankshema Parishad to fight for the claims of poor tribals in administrative offices. The way he handled their cases — with logic and legal reasoning, without breaking any rules — really impressed me. I joined the student wing of his organisation. Between 2012 and 2017, I worked as the West Godavari district president of the Adivasi Vidyaradi Sankshema Parishad. We conducted detailed awareness programmes on constitutional rights, community forest rights, and self-governance rights. This brought me in touch with education and teachers' rights activists Jalagam Ram Babu and Tellam Ramulu, who taught me in detail the legal and the administrative red-tapism that stands in the way of justice. A scholarship scam came to my notice, and I used RTI to find out where the leak was. I launched a massive protest. Following a protracted battle, the stolen scholarships were transferred to the accounts of eligible students.

Another major problem in our area is that already married men deceive tribal women and marry them for ST certificates. While any society must accept inter-community relationships, this kind of fraud is very difficult to prove. We have been able to help in a few cases. Mostly, we ask people to be alert and ask the right questions.

For decades, small and marginal cashew farmers here had depended on corrupt middlemen to sell their crops in the market. When the pandemic hit, they were caught between a rock and a hard place. The harvest season was upon them and all market linkages were broken. Procurement of crops was stuck and they faced immense financial uncertainty. At that time, my friend Sodem Mukkayya, who is also a TLP alumni of the 2022 cohort, set up a company with these farmers as shareholders. This allowed them to create their own marketing channel, fetch better prices as a collective, and as its shareholders get a share of the profits. The Adivasi Cashewnut Farmers Producer Company (ACFPC) Limited now has 714 Koya shareholders across 25 villages, and seven of them are on the board of directors.

We are also closely involved with a public library movement. These village spaces also act as youth community centres, summer camps, venues for inter-school socio-cultural activities, and study rooms for students preparing for admissions for higher studies.

In 2014, community researcher Madivi Nehru invited me to participate in

A member of the Koya community at a Humans of Gondwana travelling exhibition during Bhoom Pandum — the Celebration of Land.

an indigenous peoples conference in Delhi. Here, he introduced me to an initiative he was involved in — the Gondi dictionary project. It is a national initiative to record, preserve, and advance Gondi language and its dialects. His work was to standardise the words by using Mark Penny's Anthropologist Research Dictionary as the base. I worked on the project as his technical assistant.

Our work on the Gondi dictionary project did not stop when the compilation was complete. We kept exploring the culture, tradition, and language. We conducted quarterly workshops in all six states that have a sizeable Gondi population. It was a great learning experience working alongside elders, scholars, and researchers from the Gondi community. It is during these travels across central India, I met three activists of the larger dictionary team — Shatali Shedmake, Ramesh Kasa, and Harshit Charles. They had started an initiative inspired by the famous Facebook page Humans of New York, called Humans of Gondwana (HoG). Stories have always inspired me, so I joined them as an organising member.

Gondwana is commonly understood as an erstwhile Gondi kingdom. It actually has a bigger context. In an article — Gondwana and the Politics of Deep Past — author Pratik Chakrabarty describes it beautifully: "Gondwana presents the overlapping narratives of antiquity. A densely forested region in central India, it was named after the Gonds living there, whom British explorers believed to be the aboriginal tribes of India. In these dense forests British geologists believed they had found the oldest rock systems of India. These primitive forests and rocks became the foundation for theories of the existence of a prehistoric southern supercontinent. The Austrian geologist Eduard Suess named it Gondwanaland after this region. The imagined supercontinent has led to real landscapes. There is a game reserve called Gondwana in South Africa and a rainforest by the same name in Australia, both having derived their identity from the ancient geological land mass."

Author and the founder of Centre for Policy Alternatives, Mohan Guruswamy, writes in one of his columns in Deccan Chronicle, "The Gond kings ruled till 1751 when the British annexed it after the Raja of Nagpur died childless… There is a vast and mostly forested region spanning almost the entire midriff of India from Odisha to Gujarat, lying between the westbound Narmada and eastbound Godavari, bounded by many mountain ranges like the Vindhya, Satpura, Mahadeo, Meykul and Abujhmar, that was once the main home of the Adivasis."

At Humans of Gondwana, we collect its untold grassroots stories and histories, produce photo-documentaries, and create travelling exhibitions. The project is an ever-expanding 'memoir' of folklores, cuisines, lifestyles, musics, dances, livelihood practices, medicine systems, customs, and languages. We draw our material by working for six months in a selected area. We stay with the people and record all aspects of their lives. One of the most memorable trips was to a place Guruswamy mentions — Abujhmar in Chhattisgarh, an almost inaccessible, insurgency-affected area of India. Its breathtakingly beautiful hill-forests, I came to know later, were once the eastern reaches of Gondwana.

Our digital Gondwana has spread beyond the historical map. Humans of Gondwana is about the stories of all indigenous communities of India, and perhaps one day we will go beyond.

Reference

1. Right to Information Act 2005 mandates timely response to citizen requests for government information. The basic object of the Right to Information Act is to promote transparency and accountability in the working of the government and contain corruption.

Kranthi Kiran Sodem
Member, Humans of Gondwana.
District Member, Tribal Joint Action Committee.
TLP Fellow - 2019.
Koya Tribe, West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh.


Counter-Tide

Forest Days I Carry in My Heart

Divya Devarajan

Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are among the few states in India where the government almost compulsorily places young Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officers, at the start of their careers, in scheduled areas, as Project Officers of the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA).

The regions that are earmarked 'scheduled' (Schedule V of the Indian Constitution) have a sizeable indigenous tribal population who have a unique cultural identity and are vulnerable. Hence, they have a special governance mechanism wherein the Constitution directly safeguards the cultural and economic rights of the tribes. ITDAs are additional institutions of the state governments for delivery of public goods and services to them.

These lands are endowed with stunning forests, wildlife, rivers, and natural resources; they are also beset with compelling challenges. To ensure that work is streamlined, the Telangana state government posts young officers with powers akin to a District Collector, with single-line administration, in ITDAs.

Senior bureaucrats who came to train us at the State Administrative Training Institute (Dr. MCR HRDI) invariably referred to their ITDA postings as the most memorable period of their careers. They would also refer to S. R. Sankaran as their role model. For those who may not know, Sankaran (1934-2010) was a 1956 batch IAS officer, known as the 'people's officer' by the Dalit and tribal communities, whose welfare he dedicated his life to. He is particularly known for his remarkable work in establishing ITDAs as a single line of administration in Schedule V areas, and in enforcing of the Abolition of Bonded Labour Act of 1976.

The more I heard, the more I thought about the potential of ITDAs and the legacy of Sankaran. I was serving as project director in the e-governance department, but my heart yearned to serve in a tribal posting. I knew women officers are seldom posted in massive ITDAs like Bhadrachalam, fraught with problems of remoteness and insurgency. I am thankful to the then chief secretary, who not only encouraged me but also gave me this very posting.

In Bhadrachalam, which is situated on the banks of the river Godavari, I received first-hand exposure to the Koya, Konda Reddy, Naikpod, and Lambada tribes. It is here that I understood their struggle when they faced development-related displacement, and were denied forest resources, social justice, and developmental and cultural equity.

One of my first challenges was to get houses for a displaced tribal community, and assure them jobs in the public sector units that had acquired their lands. Relief and rehabilitation work is complex. How does one compensate for taking away life as the tribes knew it and celebrated for centuries? Can money compensate for the sacred old tree in the village, the graves of ancestors, the fields and forests that yielded bountiful harvests? Instances in the past have shown that tribes are poor managers of money because their exposure to its larger context is limited; monetary compensation is usually spent in a couple of years.

The Koya village of Padmagudem put up a strong fight against acquisition of their land for a coal mine. The women in the village were steadfast in their demands. They asked how they can just take monetary compensation and move out without a finished replacement home in sight! Their righteous fight led to the construction of the first two-bedroom rehabilitation colony in Telangana. The then executive engineer of the Tribal Welfare Department played a pivotal role in timely construction of that colony. It was a very difficult negotiation and hence it is etched in memory for the satisfaction its completion brought.

My work in Bhadrachalam prompted the government to post me in the tribal district of Adilabad in tumultuous times. It is the land of Komaram Bheem (1901-1940), a great tribal crusader who led a protracted rebellion against the oppression of the regional monarchs and the colonialists. I went there when trust and belief of the tribes in the administration was at its lowest. Inter-tribal clashes had created a lot of animosity, and a law-and-order situation was imminent. This prompted me to understand the nature of indigenous people to serve them better.

Indigenous people's lives are intricately entwined with Nature. They live in or around forests. Their festivals, music, dance, and arts are related to Nature. They are shy. They value self-respect. They think as a community first, and as individuals later. They listen more, observe more. I remember addressing villages of hundreds of people sitting in pin-drop silence.

Koyas, who I worked with in Bhadrachalam, speak the mainstream state language Telugu; their own tongue Koya has been forgotten. However, the Gonds of Adilabad still speak Gondi (Koya). Many of them, especially Gond women, don't speak Telugu. To understand and relate to them, to hear about their grievances, wishes, and aspirations first-hand, I had to learn Gondi.

My guru, Dhurva Bhoomanna, who worked with All India Radio, taught me Koya using Telugu, and I would take notes in English. It was a complex and joyful learning journey. He enthralled me with Koya folktales. Koya language has strong Dravidian roots. In fact, some words are quite similar to Tamil. Bhoomanna was mild-mannered, but a tough

taskmaster. He not only taught me the language, but even the traditions and customs. He would enact and teach me small but important things, such as respectful gestures, and how to greet men and women.

Once I could speak their language, my relationship changed. They could have heart-to-heart conversations with me, without any intermediary. It reduced the distance between the people and the administration. Seeing great value in this experience, we appointed special tribal coordinators and translators in government hospitals, making them more accessible and equitable.

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In 2016, we found ourselves with a unique problem. The state government had undertaken a massive exercise to create smaller districts for better administration. It improved the quality of administration, but in rare cases, like Mallapur, critical field realities had been missed.

The people of Mallapur village were really upset when they were made part of the Sirikonda Mandal. They had not just been separated from the Indervelly Mandal they had historically been part of, but also from the Nagoba temple to which they had a deep emotional and spiritual connection. There were practical dimensions to this bond as well. Mallapur residents would visit the Indervelly farmers' market every week. They would buy their essentials, visit the local doctor, and go to the sub-district office for grievance redressal. A few miles away was Utnoor, where they would visit the revenue office and the ITDA. This was a harmonious arrangement.

Suddenly, they were forced into Sirikonda Mandal, a sleepy, remote area. A local dam in between the two mandals made the distance difficult to navigate. Their revenue offices were now near Adilabad town, which was over an hour's journey each way. At the same time, the tribal welfare offices remained in Utnoor, which meant continual trudging in opposite directions.

Feeling deeply troubled, the villagers began to abandon their new settlement and rebuild huts inside the Indervelly Mandal jurisdiction. A prominent article in The Hindu newspaper by Harpal Singh caught our attention. The report had pictures of local police officials counselling the villagers not to abandon their village. At about the same time, Sidam Bheem Rao, a prominent tribal leader, requested my intervention. With the support of the then Revenue Secretary Rajesh Tiwari, we were able to restore Mallapur village to Indervelly Mandal. The villagers brought us baskets of custard apples as a mark of gratitude.

Gussadi dance by a Raj Gond troupe from Adilabad, Telangana, marking the beginning of winter festivities.

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Kannapur in Adilabad district is also a Gond village. In 1964, the Forest Department had ordered their eviction. Enforcers had burnt houses down, levelled criminal charges, and even imprisoned villagers. Witnessing this brute use of force, tribal villages all around had started a non-cooperation movement. This had forced the Forest Department to retract. But they never forgot what could happen if the documents were not set right. Here, three generations had been fighting for habitation rights to their ancestral home. The Revenue Department records considered it a revenue village. But Forest Department records deemed it a habitation on encroached forest land. The villagers had been fighting to establish Kannapur as a revenue village across records; as a forest village it did not have access to government development and welfare schemes. They were afraid.

Strong fears returned during my posting when the field staff of the Forest Department surveyed the village; villagers assumed that their lands would be brought under the Kawal Tiger Reserve and eviction was imminent. After hearing them, we began intense homework to study the legal provisions. We also looked at precedents of forest villages that had been converted into revenue villages.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), 2006 provides for a democratic process to restore the habitation rights of tribals who have resided in forest areas prior to 2005. The act provides for a village-level Forest Rights Committee (FRC) under the Gram Sabha to decide the geographical limits of habitation, identification of inhabitants, and the nature of rights of habitants to the forest land.

Gram Sabha is a uniquely-empowering provision of our Constitution. It is the direct government of all voting residents of a village. All other institutions — Gram Panchayat, Block Panchayat and Zilla Parishad — are constituted by elected representatives. We assisted Kannapur in creating a Forest Rights Committee and built the capacity of the villagers to execute the process. They submitted carefully preserved documentary evidence of their rights, and the decades of follow-ups with various offices. On the basis of this exhaustive proof, the District Collector approved conversion of Kannapur into a revenue village in the Forest Department records. The District Forest Officer, also a sensitive man, played a key role. The grit and resilience of the people of Kannapur remains a shining example of the tribal struggle to retain habitation rights in forest areas.

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The story of Chinchughat is equally riveting. This is a village of predominantly Thoti tribals. Thotis are master bards and folk artists living in a feudal relationship with the more dominant Gond tribe; Kaathle Maruthi is their prominent leader. Maruthi had developed a very good community participation model of development. The villagers sowed and reaped harvest from village common lands. Part of the income from the harvest was used to meet the needs of the most vulnerable family that year. Part of the income went into developing and running an English-medium school for the children.

So, when some families of Chinchughat approached me with a request, I knew that they wouldn't ask for assistance unless they genuinely needed it. They were self-sustained in the truest sense, and proud of their model of sustainable living. They said their homes were flooded every monsoon because of the low-lying nature of the land. They needed a flat land at an elevation to relocate their huts and avoid repeated losses. With the help of the local revenue officers, we found a patch of free government land, which the villagers found suitable for relocation. The families then moved to safer ground.

They later named their new habitation Divyaguda. This came as a huge surprise as I had left for my new posting. I was trained in an ethos that does not believe in glorification of professional duty. I even urged them to rename it with a Koya word, as they usually do. I was grateful to have their gratitude and blessings, and always will be. Not just in relation to Chinchughat, but every village I have worked with. Satisfaction derived from making lives better with the powers bestowed by the Constitution is greater than any recognition.

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Tribal youth are in a state of flux, trying to balance the tug of their roots with the challenges that modern development models pose. Many parents send their children to the Tribal Welfare Department's residential Ashram schools; these institutions build their aspirations for higher education and higher-paying professions. The medium of instruction in these or any other schools are different from their mother tongues. So, along with their language, they are forgetting their traditions, art forms, and musical instruments, which were taught by elders at home. Many youngsters pursue college education and jobs in towns and cities. But many of them seem to return lost and unable to fit in the urban settings, only to work again as agricultural labourers.

Dandari/Diwadi is a festival of the tribes of Adilabad. Here, the tribal youth, however highly-educated, take time to learn and practise the traditional art form of Gussadi to perform during the festival time. Adorned in peacock feather headgear, deer skin, and smeared with ash, they look majestic. Of late, they also wear sunglasses and funky watches.

It is very essential for the curriculum to have space for learning traditional art forms and cultural heritage. It is also important for the academic calendar of the schools in tribal areas to be in sync with the festivals and fairs of the region. In Peru, the government gives conditional pensions under the Pension-65 scheme to their elderly indigenous citizens provided they spend mandatory hours in the local school to teach the students indigenous arts and crafts. Such experiments are worth emulating to preserve the cultural heritage of the indigenous people of India.

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I was fortunate to be a part of an eye-opening exposure visit to Peru as Project Officer of ITDA Bhadrachalam. I had gone to look into the issues faced by the Quechua indigenous people and the developmental activities undertaken by the Peruvian government for their welfare. The issues faced by their indigenous people are very similar — land rights, development-related displacement, deforestation, lack of quality education, cultural inequity, and linguistic marginalisation. With a huge mobilisation, the tribes of Peru have been able to convince the government to bring about in two landmark legislations:

1. Right to Prior Consultation (especially in cases of industrialisation and creation of developmental projects in indigenous areas). This is similar to India's PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas

Act), 1996, and Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013.

2. Law of Language Rights: Peru was colonised by Spain, just like India was colonised by the British. Spanish is the all-pervasive official language. This law gives the indigenous people the right to be served in their mother tongues in government offices, courts, schools, shops, and the like. In Bhadrachalam and Adilabad, ITDAs and courts operate in English. The Koyas and Gonds are not even conversant in the official language of the state — Telugu, English being a far cry. The advocates used to take huge sums of money for arguing their cases and the tribes were oblivious of what transpired. I have come across tribal litigants approaching me with pride, flashing what they call 'English Orders', even though the content of the orders were antagonistic to their cause.

There is a great need for India to adopt the Peru model and ensure that the courts and government offices serve the communities in their mother tongue. Models like the mobile court for protection against corruption in land transfer in Bhadrachalam, which was established decades ago, need to be strengthened and replicated to make justice accessible. Further, there is a need to groom promising indigenous youth to take up the legal profession.

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There are so many experiences, so many memories. I can say with conviction that working with marginalised tribes enriches young administrators with empathy, teaches them about living in harmony with Nature, and deepens their understanding of justice and cultural diversity. The policymakers' idea of development is not always the same as the aspirations of our tribes. Let us hear more from them, find out about their aspirations, discuss, and make policies taking their opinions into account. It will do all of us a lot of good.

Today, I am posted in the capital city of Hyderabad. The work is consuming and engaging. However, every now and then, during my endlessly busy days, there are moments when a sight or a smell or a conversation takes my mind right back to those forests and villages. A part of me will always remain there.

Divya Devarajan, an IAS officer of the 2010 batch, currently serves as Special Secretary, Department for Women, Children, Disabled and Senior Citizens, Government of Telangana. She is also Commissioner of the Department of Women Development and Child Welfare.

An alumna of BITS-Pilani, she has a postgraduate degree in Physics and an engineering degree in Electrical and Electronics. She was chosen the best officer trainee of her batch in 2008 in the 82nd Foundation Course for Central Civil Services in Dr. MCR HRD Institute of Telangana, Hyderabad. She also won the prestigious Subash Dua Memorial Gold Medal in 2010 for IAS Training at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, the premier training institution for the civil services.

For her contribution as an IAS officer, she received the Eenadu Outstanding Woman in Public Service Award on International Women's Day, 2020. She was also awarded by the Chief Electoral Officer, Telangana, and the State Election Commission for effective conduct of elections during her tenure as the Adilabad collector.

‘In Our Village We Are the Government’

Devaji Navalu Tofa and Mohan Hirabai Hiralal

This is the story of a small tribal village. Small, but far from insignificant. This is Mendha-Lekha, the first village in India to receive the Community Forest Resource Right (CFRR) of management over 1,806 hectares of adjoining forest under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The slogan of the village is: Dilli-Mumbai mein hamari sarkar, hamare gaon mein hum hi sarkar (In Delhi-Mumbai are our elected governments, in our village we are the government).

What that means is that the entire village, as a community, manages its own affairs.

Their collective assembly — the Gram Sabha — is the ‘government’ as far as local governance is concerned. Villagers come together, discuss and deliberate on issues, and take collective decisions. They do not delegate governance to their representatives. What makes this slogan exemplary is that it solemnly reposes faith in parliamentary democracy while declaring that the people govern and control their own fate.

These are not empty words. The people of Mendha actually live by this slogan. They have not only put it into practice but have also struggled and suffered in their attempt to make it a reality. They have achieved this through another exemplary method: consensus-building and unanimous decision-making. Even if one person in the community disagrees with a decision, it is deferred. They do not go by the majority vote as is the custom all over the world. This approach has enabled them to collectively take a number of important decisions relating to governance, administration, natural resource management, protection of forests, as well as social and cultural matters. Needless to mention, consensus is the ultimate method of non-violent and participatory decision-making.

This area was earlier under the Dhanora zamindari (a feudal landholding system). When zamindari was abolished in the 1950s, the land titles were given to the tenants. Subsequently, however, the ownerships fragmented due to divisions and subdivisions.

Mendha’s struggle over the past 30 years was rewarded when the state finally accepted the people’s right over the adjoining forest. The “historic injustice” meted out to tribal communities in India was redressed to some extent.

The Act describes itself as follows, “The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 is a result of the protracted struggle by the marginal and tribal communities of our country to assert their rights over the forestland over which they were traditionally dependent. This Act is crucial to the rights of millions of tribals and other forest dwellers in different parts of our country as it provides for the restitution of deprived forest rights across India, including both individual rights to cultivated land in forestland and community rights over common property resources. The notification of Rules for the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 on 1st January 2008, has finally paved the way to undo the ‘historic injustice’ done to the tribals and other forest dwellers.”

“The livelihood of perhaps 100 million poorest of the poor (The Indian Forest Rights Act 2006: Communing Enclosures) stands to improve if implementation can succeed. The Act is significant as it provides scope and historic opportunity of integrating conservation and livelihood rights of the people.”

Mendha has transformed these rights into remunerative livelihood options. Their forest mainly yields bamboo. Previously, bamboo from the community forest was leased out to a government paper mill. They earned hardly a rupee apiece. The villagers stopped this practice. After acquisition of management rights under the Act, they sold the bamboo in the open market at ₹33 apiece and earned more than ₹1 crore. They demonstrated that community control over natural resources is far more effective than bureaucratic or private control.

Ideologically, Mendha follows the Gandhian way; more specifically, the way shown by Gandhi’s disciple Acharya Vinoba Bhave. Mendha has tried to embody the Gandhian ideals of Gram Swaraj (village self-rule) and Sarvodaya (collective upliftment), along with Bhave’s ideas about Samya Yog (the yoga of equality). It has recently declared itself a Gramdani village under the Maharashtra Gramdan Act, 1964. (Gramdan means to gift the village). Under Gramdan, individual rights over farmlands are dissolved and instead vested with the community. Amid the turbulent and violent socio-political atmosphere of central India, Mendha is an oasis of peace and harmony.

Of the total forest area of the village, the area under cultivation is only 78.85 hectares. Rest of the land is either fallow or utilised for roads and amenities. The average land holding is about 0.75 hectares. Nonetheless, every family has some land; nobody is landless.

Income from paddy and mariyan (vegetable garden) is supplemented by wage labour and the sale of forest produce. Mendha is classified as a tropical, dry deciduous forest. As the forest has been conserved very well, it contains virtually every species available in this region. There is a

variety of flora: timber and non-timber trees, vines, grasses, shrubs, bushes, creepers, and so on.

Mendha has created its own biodiversity register as per the Biodiversity Act, 2002, and enumerated all the species therein. The important ones are bamboo, teak, ein, arjun, mahua, tendu, amla, hirda, behda, dhawada, shivan, and khair. The bamboo is of two types: the commonly-found straight, long Manvel (Dendrocalamus strictus), and the thin, thorny Kalak (Bambusa vulgaris). Trees like bad, peepal, tamarind and mango are also found around the village. It is no wonder that the plentiful forest serves as a major source of livelihood. This happens in two ways: collection of non-timber forest produce (NTFP), and wage labour in forest works. Among the NTFP, the most important is bamboo, followed by mahua, tendu, charoli, gum, honey, amla, hirda, behda, papadi, karanj, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, tamarind, lakh, godambi and bibba. With some plants like mahua, tendu and ambadi, everything is useful — leaves, flowers, fruits — and has commercial value as well.

Bamboo, mahua and tendu leaves are the main sources of income, followed by charoli seeds, amla, gum, and honey. These are sold to traders. Other produce like bamboo shoots, mushrooms, green vegetables, roots and tubers are also harvested, but they are meant for the tribals' own consumption. There are two ponds in Mendha forest where fish is caught, also for the community's own consumption.

Mendha's distinguishing feature is its link with the forest. It is the forest which sustains the people, and the villagers live and die by it. That is the reason why they have fought valiantly for forest rights.

The Union government realised that unless the due rights of the tribals were granted, the disquiet and anger within the community would continue to simmer. The FRA was heralded as one of the most transformative pieces of legislation post independence. State governments were directed to implement the Act on priority. Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Tripura took the lead in sanctioning individual rights. However, community rights were not granted.

The administration's understanding of community rights was limited to providing land for common amenities like schools, playgrounds, community halls, roads, open spaces, and funeral grounds. So, wherever community assets were granted they amounted to only a few hectares. Community rights over a forest, in the real sense of the term and with a view to satisfying the livelihood needs of the community, were not given.

Against this background, Mendha's hard-won community rights were seen as pathbreaking and thrust it into the limelight. Social activists in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district were inspired by Mendha's struggle. Tribal communities elsewhere began filing claims for collective rights. To help them realise their aspirations, Vrikshamitra — an organisation that propagates the interlinked causes of environment, forest livelihood and self-rule — prepared a step-by-step guide in Marathi language explaining how to gather evidence and file community claims. The National Centre for Advocacy Studies, Pune, also published a document explaining the procedure.

However, the rights to manage non-timber forest produce, including bamboo (a critical resource), were there only on paper. It had to be converted into reality. And with this, the second phase of Mendha's struggle began.

On paper, the Mendha Gram Sabha had obtained the right to cut and sell the bamboo. However, when the Gram Sabha tried to do so, the forest department objected, saying that per the FRA, the Gram Sabha was entitled to harvest non-timber forest produce. Ergo, they could not cut the bamboo because the Indian Forest Act classified bamboo as timber.

The position that bamboo was timber was totally mischievous. The FRA clearly states that, "minor forest produce includes all non-timber forest produce of plant origin, including bamboo, brush wood, stumps, cane, tussar, cocoons, honey, wax, lac, tendu or kendu leaves, medicinal plants and herbs, roots, tubers, and the like".

In practice, Gadchiroli forest officials did not prevent the felling or sale of bamboo, but refused to issue the transit pass which was necessary for transporting forest produce. Without this pass, buyers could not procure bamboo from Mendha.

The issue generated a lot of publicity and was escalated to the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC). After much effort and the intervention of the then Union forest minister, Jairam Ramesh, the forest department complied with his directive to treat bamboo as a minor forest produce, and handed over the transit pass to the villagers.

Once this hurdle was overcome, Mendha was in business. The Gram Sabha earned over ₹20 lakh in sales proceeds, and also provided employment and paid taxes to the government. The wages paid by the Gram Sabha for cutting bamboo were five times higher than that paid by the Ballarpur paper mill (a manufacturing unit of Ballarpur Industries Limited, one of the biggest paper manufacturers of India). However, in order to prevent indiscriminate felling, a labourer was allowed to cut a maximum of 50 bamboos per day, earning ₹650 as daily wages in 2011. At the time, the wage rate under the government's Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) was ₹125 per day, and the market wage rate was between ₹150-200.

The Gram Sabha was not interested in the indiscriminate cutting of bamboo. They only cut as much as was required to manage the forest.

Sensing that mere bamboo sale would neither be remunerative nor sustainable, the Gram Sabha decided to make effective use of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Based on the EGS Act of Maharashtra, the MGNREGA is among the most potent policy instruments adopted in India.

The Gram Sabha decided to use it for forest conservation and management activities. Given Mendha's credentials, the government appointed the Gram Sabha as a nodal agency for implementing pilot employment generation projects under MGNREGA. This meant that the Gram Sabha could plan and implement its own works.

These included trenches around bamboo clusters, clearing unwanted growth, constructing bunds, repairing water channels, erecting soil and water conservation structures and mending pathways. Timely harvesting

In Menda Lekha, even if one person in the community disagrees with a decision, it is deferred. The Gram Sabha does not decide by a majority vote as is the dominant practice in the world.

of bamboo is important, hence, cutting operations were undertaken as required. Likewise, when Mendha received a grant of ₹7,25,000 under the Swachh Bharat Mission to construct toilets in the village, instead of hiring a contractor, the villagers did the work themselves.

Between 2012-2016, MGNREGA projects planned and executed by the Gram Sabha generated about 50,000 days of work, with an average daily wage of ₹190. Though this was less than the rate for cutting bamboo, it nevertheless contributed significantly to the village economy. Most importantly, productive assets were created in the forest which helped in the rejuvenation and conservation of this ecological resource.

Tendu leaves — an essential raw material for the bidi industry — are another significant non-timber forest produce. The bidi is but a pinch of tobacco rolled into a tendu leaf. Collection of tendu leaves is a major source of livelihood for tribal communities of central India. The Mendha Gram Sabha is also involved in the collection and sale of tendu leaves. Even though the price of the leaves fluctuates, the Gram Sabha has maintained the wage rates. Further, the Gram Sabha has received a grant from the Tribal Development Department to construct an oil pressing unit and a grinding mill for processing chironji/charoli seeds (*Buchanania lanzan*).

Mendha has a library and a community hall equipped with a video camera and LCD projector. It has computers and internet, with printers and a photocopying machine. The Gram Sabha trained some of the youth in the use of computers and information technology.

Although the pace was tardy initially, it picked up. As per the Monthly Progress Report (MPR) published by the Maharashtra government, 1,388 community claims (covering 4,66,126 hectares) were sanctioned in Gadchiroli in March 2019, up from 737 community claims (covering 1,33,950 hectares) in November 2011. Across Maharashtra, 5,008 tribal community claims were sanctioned in March 2019, with the highest number being from Gadchiroli.

Cartelisation by traders to drive down prices of forest produce made it imperative for the Gram Sabhas to collectivise. We took the initiative in this regard and mooted the idea of a Maha Sangh (federation) of the Gram Sabhas in Dhanora taluka. The idea of collective processes was not unknown to the Gonds. They had the Ilakha system which brought together all communities in a given area. The idea of the Maha Sangh was readily accepted and more than 60 Gram Sabhas came together to deliberate on matters like:

1. Dealing with traders and contractors involved in bamboo and tendu procurement.
2. Negotiating with the Ballarpur paper mill.
3. Managing the Forest Department.
4. Preparing working plans and biodiversity registers.
5. Engaging with the government administration, including the Tribal Development Corporation.
6. Training people on how to manage CFRRs.

The idea subsequently spread to neighbouring talukas, where similar Maha Sanghs were formed.

After sanctioning the CFRRs, the government realised that unless financial assistance was provided to the village communities, they would not be able to prepare and execute plans for the conservation and management of forests. A major achievement of these Maha Sanghs was to convince the Tribal Development Department to transfer grant funds directly to the accounts of Gram Sabhas, without going through any intermediaries.

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I believe that you want the millions of India to be happy, and for that we have to consider only one thing: how can the millions obtain self-rule?

— Mahatma Gandhi

Devaji Tofa, one of India's foremost forest rights activists, is a resident of Mendha village in Dhanora sub-division of Gadchiroli. He is the coordinator of the Gram Niyojan Evam Vikas Parishad, the village organisation which carries out planning and development.

A community elder of the Gond people, Tofa has worked for decades on tribal welfare and commands great respect. Although he has not pursued formal education, he has a mastery over Marathi and Hindi languages apart from his mother tongue Gondi. In 2021, Gondwana University honoured him by conferring a D.Lit.

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, an active member of Jayaprakash Narayan's Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Wahini and a believer of Mahatma Gandhi-Vinoba Bhave's thesis of people's power, set up the pioneering Vrikshamitra in 1984 in Gadchiroli. He plays the role of a Sahyogi Mitra (collaborator friend), an activist and a knowledgeable worker, who propagates the concept of Gram Swaraj, with effective and systematic adoptive management, broadly emphasising forest conservation, sustainability, equity, and security.

Following his persistent efforts, Mendha-Lekha was accorded the CFRR title in 2009. It was also declared a Gramdan village in 2013, the first in the country after the death of Vinoba Bhave. His knowledge and direction has helped the people of Mendha-Lekha in making the Gram Sabha a national model of direct democracy and participatory decision-making.

Nomad's Land: A Long Way Home

Dr. Javaid Rahi

September 13, 2021. The Jammu and Kashmir government handed over individual and community rights papers to beneficiaries — primarily from the Gujjar-Bakerwal and Gaddi-Sippi communities. This was thanks to the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) being extended to Jammu and Kashmir through the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019. Coming after a 14-year-long wait, it could change the lives of lakhs of tribes facing deprivation at all levels.

Through this action, the government has exhibited much-needed resolve for the expeditious implementation of the FRA — a long-pending demand of the nomadic people of the Union Territory, who are listed as Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the Constitution of India.

According to the 2011 Census, STs constitute 11.9 percent of the total population of Jammu and Kashmir. Of this, the Gujjar-Bakerwal, the pastoralists, comprise 85 percent. While they are spread all over Jammu and Kashmir, the highest numbers are in Rajouri district. The Economic Survey of Jammu and Kashmir, 2017-2018, conducted by the Planning and Development department of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, reveals that 42.05 percent of the STs live below the poverty line. Being poor, they largely depend on forest lands and forest produce, and migrate biannually in search of pastures for their sheep, goats, cows, buffalos and horses.

Forests cover 1,01,387 square kilometres of Jammu and Kashmir, which lies between latitude 32°17' and 37°05' in the north and longitude 72°31' and 80°20' in the east. The indigenous communities use almost all the main areas of the forests as they migrate between the two regions — Kashmir valley and Jammu. In summers they migrate towards the higher mountain ranges including Nun, Tatakuti, Hagshu, Kolahoi, Kala Pahar, Brammah, Kazinag, Sadhna, Samasbari, and areas in the Pir Panjal, Zojila hills, and the inner Himalayan ranges; in winters they shift to the Jammu plains or less hilly terrain.

Most Gujjars-Bakerwals and Gaddi-Sippis are pastoralists, agricultural labourers, and small and marginal cultivators. A large chunk of this population lacks access to facilities such as food rations, education, roads, water, electricity, and healthcare. Per the 2019-2020 annual report published by the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, they face neglect in almost all spheres of life. Tribal groups are hopeful that speedy implementation of the FRA will not only safeguard their rights and interests, but will also boost the tribal economy.

The FRA is the biggest policy protection they have known since the grant of ST status way back in 1991. The FRA empowers indigenous and other traditional forest-dwellers to exploit the forests for sustenance and livelihood. It also protects them against forced displacement and eviction from forest lands. In the absence of the FRA, the Gujjar-Bakerwals and Gaddi-Sippis have been ousted from their habitats for decades. Now the act entitles them to ownership and cultivation rights, and the right to use water resources and minor forest produce, excluding timber. Further, they have grazing rights as well.

Thanks to the constant efforts of the Tribal Affairs department, work is on to permit claims under the FRA at all places, except a few, including forests located in municipal areas.

We organised camps in different parts of Jammu and Kashmir to spread awareness in the community and among Forest Rights Committee (FRC) members about the newly-extended Act. We found that due to low literacy among tribes, their understanding of the Act, rules and procedures is very poor. Even some forest department officials are not sufficiently informed.

Coordination between the FRC and the government staff during physical verification of claims is very low. Physical verification, demarcation, and mapping have to be conducted in the presence of FRC members, but the Gram Sabha / FRC are not adequately informed.

Deputy Commissioners were to start the process of converting 'forest villages'/'old habitats' to 'revenue villages' under the FRA. That is due August 5, 2021. Further, it has been observed that in some areas the FRC quorum does not comply with the 2:1 tribal to women membership ratio mandated under the Act.

Also, due to the lack of transparency at the village level, most FRCs do not maintain records of claims submitted to them. In some areas, the forest department still evicts tribals from forest lands, which is against the spirit of the Act.

Obtaining the ST certificate from the tehsildar is difficult as a large number of tribes reside in forests and the ST certificate is not issued without revenue records. In Odisha, the Gram Sabha is authorised to issue a Tribal Certificate for FRA purposes.

The maximum number of issues are related to inter-village/-tehsil/-district/-state claims, as also regarding the filing of claims. Joint claims in the names of both the man and woman need to be encouraged.

A Forest Rights Act awareness meeting with the Gujjar-Bakerwals of Jammu and Kashmir.

On December 1, 2019, the Jammu and Kashmir government accelerated the process of implementing the FRA by constituting Gram Sabhas along with three major committees to oversee and formulate the implementation: the monitoring committee, the district committees and the sub-divisional committees.

To complement the process, we launched an awareness campaign to guide tribes about their forest rights, and the process of recognition, verification, and vesting of those rights.

We adopted a four-tier strategy for the campaign:

1. We conducted about 100 awareness camps in far-flung areas, to an overwhelming response;
2. Launched a social and electronic media campaign in Hindi, Gojri, and Urdu that reached the target audience;
3. Produced videos that explain the Act, show how to stake claims under the FRA, and translate the rules and claim forms into Urdu.
4. Ran online programmes and a helpdesk to guide people and answer their calls.

In order to implement the FRA properly, a sustained campaign is required. Awareness of the aims, objectives, provisions, rules and procedures under the Act among the STs, OFDs and concerned authorities, is imperative. Also vital is the publication of the Act and the rules in local languages, and distributing the same to the Gram Sabhas, FRCs and government departments. When claims are rejected at any level for whatsoever reason, free legal aid needs to be provided to the ST and other forest-dwelling communities.

Jammu and Kashmir's tribal population has historically and politically suffered massive neglect, deprivation, and abandonment in all spheres of life; their struggle for social, political, and economic empowerment continues. The FRA rekindles hope.

Dr. Javaid Rahi is a tribal rights crusader from Jammu and Kashmir. He is also actively engaged in the preservation of tribal culture and language.

A Ph.D. on tribal languages of Jammu and Kashmir, Dr. Rahi is well-versed in Persian, Urdu, Punjabi, and Dogri, besides Hindi and English.

His contributions include the Gojri dictionary, the Hindi-Gojri dictionary and the folk dictionary of the Gujjar tribe. A recipient of the National Fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, he has also received the Best Playwright Award from the Jammu and Kashmir Cultural Academy.

Up from a Past That's Rooted in Pain, I Rise

Lalita Bethekar

If you chance into Katkumbh on a Thursday morning, you will find yourself in the weekly haat-bazaar. People from 40 villages come to buy a wide array of essential supplies. The next nearest big market is in Bhainsdehi, 30 kilometres away.

We are in the region of Melghat in the Satpura hills range, geologically one of the oldest landforms in the Indian landscape; it is a spectacular play of hills and ravines. The villages adjoin one of India's largest and oldest tiger reserves, spread over a little less than 3,000 square kilometres. The Tapti river flows through the tropical forest. It is full of teak, tiwas, bija, haldu, saja, dhawda, and lendia trees. We also collect non-timber forest produce and medicines like moha, tendu, amla, behada, bhilawa, bor, mango, khair, jamun, apta, bel, and kulu. There are nearly 300 types of bird, hundreds of animals and amphibians, and the highest number of forest owlets in India. There are 40 tigers.

Melghat is not an isolated forest. It is a part of 16 semi-contiguous protected areas and 13 tiger reserves across the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and a small part of Uttar Pradesh. This central Indian natural tiger corridor of 3,73,704 square kilometres is home to more than one-quarter of the world's wild tiger population. The hundreds of tribes of the region retain rights to original forest homelands and cumulatively maintain a greater socio-political assertion than tribes in any other part of the country.

The governments say that forest-dwelling tribes are a threat to wildlife. If our forests were not truly diverse, would you find tigers in it?

A detailed on-ground study by Indian scientists of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute of Washington in 2018 confirms that the government development projects have created 567 types of barriers — roads, railways, mines, dams and thermal power plants — that have fractured the tiger corridor. Any further expansions or new projects will curtail the gene flow of the tigers and eventually wipe them out. Because it is a keystone species, once tigers die, the forests will die.

Why is the government trying to evict forest-dwelling tribes in the name of protecting wildlife, when its own projects are literally killing the forests? Is it about us, the wildlife, or the land?

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 gives forest-dwelling tribal communities Right to Self-Cultivation and Habitation, which are usually regarded as Individual Rights; and Community Rights such as grazing, fishing, access to water bodies, access to traditional seasonal resources, and the right to protect, regenerate, conserve, or manage any community forest resource for sustainable use. It empowers the Gram Sabha — the direct democracy system of all eligible voters at the village level — to allocate forest land for developmental purposes to fulfil basic infrastructural needs of the community. The Gram Sabha is responsible for the conservation and protection of biodiversity, and adjoining catchment areas. It has the power to stop any destructive practices affecting these resources or cultural and natural heritage of the tribals.

Since it is also the body that has to give a go-ahead to any plan to move the community from its homeland, the forest department officials, every now and then, force some village or the other to call Gram Sabha meetings. In these meetings, the officials slip in covert line items on removal of villages from the forest buffer zone; we don't live in the core zones anyway. Sometimes they stop foodgrains supplies to villages they are trying to move. Sometimes they issue notices for a meeting mid-monsoon. We receive 950 mm to 1400 mm of rainfall. Every year roads get washed away. The terrain is already tough. So, most villagers are unable to get to the meetings.

In conjunction with the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Settlement Act, 2013, FRA protects the tribal population from eviction without rehabilitation and settlement. Yet, since we have seen the villages that have been resettled and ruined — socially, financially, culturally, politically, and intellectually — none of us support this act.

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I grew up in a joint family. My father has six brothers and a sister. My grandfather had five brothers, three of whom live in the same village. Our family is one of the largest. As a child, I remember our house was always filled with people and activity. We never cooked food for less than 20 people. My family used to cultivate on 20 acres of land — sorghum, toor, wheat, gram, sesame seeds, groundnut, sugarcane, and vegetables — and raised cattle for milk and milk products. People would call my grandfather Dhani Korku, which means Rich Korku. Later, when my father took charge of the family, people would call him Dhani Korku too. I didn't know the difference between rich and poor then.

My father did all the farming. My four uncles were in jobs away from the village. They would visit during vacations. As I grew older, I began to hear strange conversations in the house. My uncles had started asking my father for accounts related to farming; they wanted money. They would question every little thing, even what and how much we ate for a meal.

Finally, a split was decided upon. When we farmed the undivided land, we could make do. Now, we were pushed to the wall. Forget going to

school, we didn't even have enough to eat. My grandmother would bring food to us without telling anyone. My father never allowed my mother to take up daily-wage labour. He later told me that once someone had behaved inappropriately with her. My siblings and I started working small jobs to bring in some income.

I was in middle school. My sister and I would teach primary school-level lessons in adult literacy classes. I was paid a meagre ₹100 to ₹150 a month. The next three years, I worked as a community volunteer for the Health Department, on clean drinking water and disease control. I was paid ₹300 per month. One of my brothers used to work with a tractor crew; his job was to load and unload sand and ballast. He was too young for the job, merely 12, and would hesitate to go to work as he couldn't even lift the ballast container properly. My other brother worked at a sweet shop in the weekly market. He would clean plates and glasses, and sometimes came back with little pouches of sweets for us. We couldn't even afford cooking oil for fifteen days a month. This was our life between the years 1993 and 2008. At some point, my elder sister and I even worked as domestic helpers for a daily wage of ₹25. Sometimes when my brothers heard we were being mistreated, he would stop us from going.

I advised my younger brothers to take admission in a government-run ashram school after finishing middle school. Ashram schools are residential schools which impart education up to the higher-secondary level to children belonging to Scheduled Tribes. My father was hesitant because of his own. experiences . He said that children are mistreated and are not given enough food. We were able to secure admission for the two of them, but my father's fears turned out to be true. We received news from my brothers that they did not get enough food — at home, we could at least eat our fill of roti and chutney. My younger brother had a rift with the staff there; his complaint was that those in charge would favour some over others. So, when the Additional Commissioner of Tribal Development Department visited and asked the children if there was any problem at the hostel, my brother complained. As a result, the staff ensured that he failed his class. He continued his studies by cycling 15 kilometres every day to an undergraduate college run by an NGO.

I did not have any money to go to college. So, I kept working for the next five years. Somewhere along the way, a kind person helped me get into college and I was able to finish my graduation. I remember that my mother pawned her jewellery so that my sister and I don't drop off. We were so broke that we were never able to get it back from the pawnbroker.

Finally, I started working with an NGO named Khoj. It was the turnaround. I began to see the bigger picture.

Thousands of children under six years of age have died because of malnutrition-related complications in Melghat's villages in the past 20 years. We face displacement from our own lands; the forest and revenue departments question our right to ancestral holdings. The schools, roads, and healthcare services are negligible. About 40 percent of the people have land, mostly small holdings; because many of them can't afford pumps, irrigation is a challenge. The rest are farm hands and bonded labourers. Young people are forced to migrate for work. They leave their land and hearth to become menial labourers in cities and towns of neighbouring states.

Post 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has begun to bring some relief. This scheme provides a legal guarantee for 100 days of employment in every financial

The Melghat Tiger Reserve nestled in the Satpura Range is geologically one of the oldest landforms in the Indian landscape.

year to adult members of rural households willing to do public works-related unskilled manual labour at the statutory minimum wage. But work is available only between December and May. In the monsoons there is no work. People live from debt to debt. That is the period when malnutrition-related deaths rise.

I was restless seeing the exploitation of people everywhere. Police and government officers did nothing. Even if people protested, the injustices were kept buried in government files.

This prompted me to take up public leadership and contest the elections for village council (Panchayat). It was not easy. Apart from indigenous contestants, we also had contestants from other communities, some financially and politically very strong. With persistence and good work, I won.

Ever since, I have moved higher courts against displacement. I have fought for government-assigned nutritional supplies for children that are stolen by corrupt intermediaries. I have fought for teachers to be present in schools, and health services to be responsive. I have fought against illegal alcohol shops, moneylenders, non-payment of MNREGS dues, and non-implementation of government schemes.

Some of the red-tapism we face is downright bizarre. If you want to build a cattle shed or well under a government scheme, you have to build it with your own money before you can claim the aid. Where will poor people find that initial capital?

I lose many battles. Some, I win. But youth leadership is growing. I have formed a group with like-minded peers so that we can contest the next level of elections supporting each other. The tide will turn. Turn, it must.

The weekly market at Katkumbh village.

Lalita Bethekar
Sarpanch, Katkumbh.
TLP Fellow - 2017.
Korku Tribe, Amravati, Maharashtra.

Goddesses' Own Country

S. Harikishore

Prologue

Climbing the steps of a building in Thiruvananthapuram in 2016, I felt a tinge of disappointment. I had just left a plush office in Pathanamthitta while serving as its District Collector. The new job put me on the third floor of a modest building near Thiruvananthapuram Medical College. When I was told that I would be the executive director of Kudumbashree, I had a different picture in mind. My room had a small table and chair. I sat thinking about the inspiring speech I had received when I was transferred: 'Kudumbashree is Kerala's contribution to the world. It is a great honour to have been selected to lead it. With a multidisciplinary team, you can helm what is the world's largest women's empowerment project; you can take it to the next level.'

A few days earlier, I was on a train from Kannur to Thiruvananthapuram when a fellow passenger got chatty.
"Where do you work?"
"I am in a government job."
"What job?"
"I am an IAS officer."
"So, you are a District Collector?"
"I was. Now I am the executive director of Kudumbasree."
"Kudumbasree! Isn't that a group for women who pick waste! An IAS officer for that!"
I do not remember what else he said. I surely said nothing.

It's 2022. I am now the director of the Department of Industries and Commerce. Looking back, I know in my heart that the Kudumbashree stint is, and always will be, a milestone of my life.

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The Model

Kudumbashree is the Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission. It was launched on May 17, 1998, with an aim to eradicate absolute poverty within a definite time frame of 10 years under the leadership of local self-governments formed and empowered by the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution of India. The mission mobilises poor women into community-based organisations (CBO). In doing so, it adopts a process approach rather than a project approach; it perceives poverty not just as economic deprivation but also a deprivation of human rights. The network has a membership of 45,85,677 women, and counting. Membership is open to all adult women, but in favour of outreach maximisation is limited to one membership per family.

Today, out of the roughly 200 metro systems in the world, the Kochi Metro is the only one to be run entirely by women — women of Kudumbashree.

Kudumbashree acts as a National Resource Organisation (NRO) and extends support and consultancy services to 19 states and one Union Territory in the areas of poverty alleviation, livelihoods management, and Panchayat Raj.

In a robust showcase of agility, it deviated from the charted programmatic course and worked with local bodies to ensure that no one in Kerala went hungry during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The 1,120 Janakeeya hotels run by Kudumbashree delivered an average of 80,000 meals every day at ₹20.

The CBOs are built on a three-tier structure that is aligned with democratically-elected governance systems. At the primary level, it has Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs). The middle tier at the ward-level is the Area Development Society (ADS), a federation of NHGs. Finally, at the Panchayat or municipal-level it has the Community Development Society (CDS), a federation of ADSs. Social development projects are implemented through CDSs that serve as the community wing of local governments. Kudumbashree has a state-wide presence, with 2,90,723 NHGs, 19,489 ADSs, and 1,064 CDSs.

NHGs conduct training sessions on economic empowerment that it makes possible on the ground via its livelihood programmes and access to bank loans. Nonetheless, some of the poorest remain outside the ambit of its efforts.

Tribal NHGs

Of the 2.9 lakh NHGs, 16,000 are dedicated to tribal communities. An NHG is called a Tribal NHG when 60 percent to 80 percent of its members are indigenous. The tribal population of Kerala is 4,00,000. NHGs cover 95 percent of this population.

Tribal NHGs receive ₹15,000 as a revolving fund. Additionally, a Vulnerability Reduction Fund (VRF) is given to vulnerable NHGs, among which disaster-prone and Tribal NHGs are given priority. NHGs roll out various financial and livelihood packages and subsidies from time to time; the terms for disbursement of funds are relatively relaxed.

Since most indigenous people are dependent on land, related training and support programmes are also in place. ₹4,000 is provided as a Joint Liability Group (JLG) corpus for the farmland. An area incentive is given to

Out of the roughly 200 metro systems in the world, the Kochi Metro is the only one to be run entirely by women — women of Kudumbashree.

general NHGs that have incurred an agricultural loan of at least ₹1 lakh. Tribal NHGs are provided agricultural incentives without the requirement of a loan. Kudumbashree also supports goat-farming self-help groups (aadugramam), and cow-rearing and milk-marketing self-help groups (ksheerasagaram) in tribal tracts.

The NHGs have dedicated District Programme Managers (DPMs) in all 14 districts of Kerala. They are in charge of microfinance, gender equity, marketing, organisational planning, skilling, and agriculture. Additionally, tribal communities have exclusive DPMs. Further, of the four Block Coordinators in a district, one is responsible for their social development. There are 360 monitors responsible for connecting tribal women to various projects of Kudumbashree. The monitors ensure that the members are empowered in their own hamlets.

Special Activations for Tribes

An important programme is the bridge course. The number of school dropouts is comparatively high among tribal populations. Bridge courses impart equivalency training and helps them take equivalency tests; slowly they are enabled to enter the educational mainstream. The courses are conducted at 58 locations in nine districts; nearly 1,700 students have benefitted from them. Kudumbashree also runs coaching classes for Public Service Commission (PSC) examinations. There is a quota for tribal candidates in PSC jobs. About 750 tribal students have been prepared; many have made it through.

Tribal Asraya

Agathi Rahitha Keralam (Destitution-Free Kerala) is another key initiative. Launched as Asraya, it won the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Administration in 2007. Per this, Kudumbashree understands the social condition of member's families by surveying and assessing them on a nine-point system. Families that meet seven of the nine points are deemed to be destitute. They get the maximum support. Subsequently, the personal development plan of these families are prepared in collaboration with the Panchayat or Urbal Local Body (ULB) as the case may be; it is co-funded by Kudumbashree, Local Self-Government Institutes (LSGIs), individuals, and other independent bodies. When the Panchayats / ULBs submit reports on destitute families, Kudumbashree extends a Challenge Fund.

A Challenge Fund allocates money for community projects addressing basic needs — 40 percent of the total project cost, up to ₹50 lakh. In non-tribal communities, the funding is restricted to up to ₹40 lakh.

Kudumbashree identified destitute families in 941 Panchayats and ULBs. 170 LSGIs reported destitution-free status. As an incentive, these tribal projects received a higher Challenge Fund corpus.

Convergence with Panchayats

The LSGIs are key to Kudumbashree because they have funds, administrative authority, and human resources. So the CDSs, the top-tier of the Kudumbashree ecosystem, closely work with Panchayats. They take the lead in placing before Panchayats the needs and demands of the people and implementing projects. In Kerala, 10 percent of Panchayat funds are earmarked for tribal projects. The CDSs ensure that the projects are of value. They showcase the best-performing tribal projects and incorporate the best practices in other projects.

Hamlets are scattered tribal settlements that come under the local government closest to them. To reach them in earnest and address their marginalisation, a hamlet-level campaign was launched in 2019-2020. It worked to understand the development needs of 2,515 hamlets, to begin with. Focus groups collated and analysed their needs in terms of infrastructure and basic amenities. Thereafter, a list of hamlet-level projects was prepared and submitted to the Panchayats for implementation. This ensured that hyper-local needs were translated into developmental works. This is arguably the best approach to create public projects at the grassroots level.

Attappady Special Project

Development is low in Attappady in Palakkad district, as it is among the more backward regions of Kerala. It lags in health and education indicators, and infant mortality is high. The Union government had sanctioned ₹60 crore under the Attappady Comprehensive Tribal Development (ACTD) and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group Development (PVTGD) projects in 2014-2015 as a part of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). There are three Panchayats in Attappady — Agali, Sholayur, and Puthur. They have 192 hamlets with 9,433 tribal families (33,440 people). As part of the project, 663 NHGs have been formed till now with 8,084 tribal women members. The NHGs disburse monies under various funds like the Corpus Fund, Livelihood Fund, Vulnerability Reduction Fund, and Revolving Fund for income generation and microfinance. Additionally, there is a special focus on animal husbandry, agriculture, and micro-enterprise.

To make this model replicable at the state and national level, Kudumbashree realised that all developmental gaps in tribal communities needed to be identified. Subsequently, Kudumbashree implemented ACTD in Nilambur in Malappuram, Thirunelly in Wayanad, Aralam in Kannur, and two special projects in the remote village of Edamalakkudy, a remote village in Idukki. These special projects were related to the collection and marketing of Non-Timber Forest Products, which is a Constitutional right of the forest tribes.

In Attappady in 2013, there was a spike in infant mortality numbers caused by poor maternal nutrition and health. The government decided to start community kitchens to distribute balanced meals. These kitchens, funded by the Tribal Welfare Department and the Social Justice Department, are managed by Kudumbashree field staff. Presently, 183 community kitchens are operational in identified areas, where food is served to over 12,000 expecting mothers every day.

P. K. Kalan Project

Acknowledging our credentials, the Tribal Welfare Department entrusted Kudumbashree with the challenging P. K. Kalan rehabilitation programme. This was piloted in Alappuzha, where 165 tribal families lived scattered across far-flung hamlets. Kudumbashree office-bearers visited the families, documented their needs, and accordingly prepared customised plans for each. This was collated into a master plan. Houses

of 68 families were renovated at a total cost of ₹1.83 crore. ₹1.49 crore was spent on constructing houses for 21 people. Toilets and jobs were also given space in the ambit of the project.

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Epilogue

On July 16, 2021, when I climbed down the very same steps one last time, on my way to a new posting, I walked with my head down. I didn't want to meet the gazes of colleagues and co-workers with tears. If I ever meet that man on the train, I would tell him how the Kudumbashree experience has found a forever space in my heart.

S. Harikishore is a 2008 batch IAS officer belonging to the Kerala state cadre. He has served as Executive Director of Kudumbashree, District Collector of Pathanamthitta, and Director of the Scheduled Tribes Development Department, among other key roles in the Government of Kerala.

He is presently the Director of Industries and Commerce Department with an additional charge of Director of Information and Public Relations.

He is interested in general administration, public policy, teaching, writing and travel. He has authored two books in Malayalam, Ningalkkum IAS Nedam and Unnthavijayathinu Ezhu Vazhikal. He is also a regular contributor of articles and columns to leading news publications.

Breaking Through the Dark

Thennarassu Sudaroli

I was born to Sudaroli Sundaram, a prominent Irula leader, and my mother Gnanambal, in Gingee, in Viluppuram district of Tamil Nadu. The town is famous for what is considered the most impregnable citadel of southern India — the Gingee Fort or Senji Fort, named after one of its guardian deities, Sanjiamman. It has over 800 years of blood-soaked, fascinating history — with rulers, rebels, and colonisers fighting for control.

Even ten generations ago, our family was one of the many Irula (aka Iruliga and Irular) households on the fort property. We consider Senjiamman our deity, and believe that there was a time in the fort's haphazardly documented past when we were its rulers.

A lot of people have watched the film Jai Bhim (2021), directed by T. J. Gnanavel, starring Suriya. India chose it as one of its entries for the Academy Awards, 2022. It did not make that cut, but at home it earned acclaim, box office returns, and believe it or not, interest in our community. Even in Tamil Nadu, where the highest number of Irulas live (small populations reside in Karnataka and Kerala), people do not know anything about us. Jai Bhim brought into the spotlight a nearly 30-year-old case that was fought by Madras High Court Judge K. Chandru when he was a young advocate. He had taken on police brutality and state oppression against a marginalised settlement in Virudhachalam, about 100 kilometres from Gingee. The victims were from the Kuravar community. Taking artistic licence, the filmmakers set their story in the Irula community.

The word Irula means people who can find their way in the dark. It is probably because we are trusted healers and herbalists, proficient in sourcing snake venom, antidotes against poisoning, and medicines for emergencies, come day or night. We used to be semi-nomadic. We share our history of oppression with the Kuruvars, a gypsy community that traded salt and grains, and are also exceptionally skilled weavers of baskets and mats.

Our core professions were rendered obsolete by the economic policies of the colonisers. We were pushed to extreme deprivation and bonded labour. Hunger forced us to steal food. So, the British labelled us 'hereditary criminals' under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. Books I have read say this act was also born out of a moral bias that viewed nomadism and indigenousity as amoral ways of life that must be punished. Around 200 tribes were criminalised in the country and social structures were decimated. To this day, the police frame us in any case they cannot crack; we are 'readymade culprits'. Many Irulas are bonded labourers in brick kilns; women are sexually abused at work, and even trafficked.

The government classifies us as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), marked by low literacy levels, economic backwardness, and a declining population. In all of Tamil Nadu, there are only about 1,90,000 Irulas remaining.

In 1978, when my father was 19, circumstances made him the co-founder of Pazhangudi Makkal Munnani (Indigenous Peoples' Front), a social movement. As he grew into the role, he established the Sudaroli Trust. It has been working for decades to rehabilitate bonded labourers and trafficked women; in both cases many rescuees are minors. By fostering education and alternative livelihoods, the organisation has resettled nearly a thousand families.

When I was in school, our house had a steady stream of visitors. People came to my father for counsel on matters of all kinds; most came seeking work or help with police cases. My parents never made anybody feel unwelcome. Everyone's suffering and story had a place in our house. My sister and I grew up listening.

I became an engineer and got a good job. But soon I realised that working in a cubicle in an air-conditioned office was not my cup of tea. I quit and returned to Gingee to work at the Sudaroli Trust. I was amazed that my parents did not reprimand me; had I continued with the job, I could have brought them financial security.

My big moment came when we rescued 18 families from bondage. However, a child died during the operation. Even though it was not our fault, I realised that we must be able to preempt mistakes of every party involved. Since then, the team has successfully rescued over 600 labourers.

The critical challenge Irulas face is with respect to community certificates, which give them reservations in welfare schemes, educational institutes and government jobs. Earlier, these certificates were issued by the local government office. In the 1990s, to prevent non-community members from obtaining certificates through graft and other illegal means, the issuing office was changed to the Revenue Divisional Office (RDO). The RDO is always in the town, far from where we live. It takes time and money to travel up and down, so most people give up.

The other issue is that of habitat. Some Irulas stay in the Nilgiri hills and are better off. They harvest honey and forest produce, and grow coffee. But the Irulas in the plains live in the semi-arid Moyar-Bhavani river basin, cut off from roads, shops, jobs, schools, everything.

Sudaroli Sundaram, a prominent Irula leader, successfully moved the Tamil Nadu High Court to obtain community certificate rights for 20,000 tribal villagers.

Irula singer Nanjamma's voice went viral with her song 'Kalakkatha' in 2020. She also wrote the lyrics.

I wanted an organisation to look into the issues of the youth. While I was looking for direction and support, I was invited to attend the Samvaad Tribal Leadership Programme, 2019. Overnight, I found myself connected to indigenous leaders across India. With the help of the fellowship, I started the Integrated Centre for Tribal Research, Resource and Rehabilitation (ICTRRR). Our vision is to create at least 100 entrepreneurs and 100 leaders in 300 villages over the next five years.

When the lockdown was imposed, I knew that our community would be among the worst hit because we are poorly connected. Every day, more and more people were asking for food — mothers for supplies for their newborns, families for new roofing because rains had destroyed their houses, while the elderly needed medicines.

With the help of donors, ICTRRR took care of more than 5,454 families, providing food and non-food essentials for months. After the Tamil Nadu Tribal Welfare Board announced a monetary relief of ₹2,000 for every registered member, the money was transferred directly to the beneficiaries' accounts, to avoid possible corruption. We also could get the benefit for 2,200 others, who should have rightfully received the relief but did not due to lack of documentation.

As time passes, Irula empowerment movements have been growing. My father moved the High Court for community certificate rights for 20,000 people; now hundreds of students from those settlements can get higher education and jobs. It is owing to the force of a movement like the Tribal People's Front that the government has been compelled to revamp and revitalise the almost-idle Tamil Nadu Tribal Welfare Board, create a dedicated Directorate for Tribal Affairs, and, in a recent move, establish the Scheduled Castes / Tribes Welfare Commission for protection of legal rights. This organisation has also succeeded in generating community certificates for about 200 people in the Union Territory of Puducherry; the Irulas there had no recognition for decades.

With its street performances and concerted awareness drives, the Dollcattai Irular Cultural and Mullai Cultural have given vulnerable people strength against unethical employers.

In Kerala and Karnataka, Irula cultural assertion is stronger. Lest the children get culturally disconnected, a women's group, the Dolkattai Irular Kalai Kuzhu, has been digitally recording traditional songs. Many ballads make their way into mainstream films, such as Kumbalangi Nights (2019) and Ayyappanum Koshiyum (2020). There is even a film made in the Irular language, Nethaji (2019). Nanjamma, an elderly folk singer of the Azad Kala Samithi, who sang in Ayyappanum Koshiyum, went viral. Her song is a lullaby. In translation, it goes:

The sandalwood tree is in blossom in the east;
Shall we go, pluck the flowers,
and watch aeroplanes fly over us?

Many Irulas are stuck in fallow lands where flowers don't grow. They hear distant rumblings of highway traffic but the roads don't connect to their settlements. We make genuine cases for land pattas (ownership), but our petitions gather dust in government offices. Nanjamma's earthy voice on YouTube is not just music; it is reaffirmation in difficult times that we are not defeated yet.

Thennarassu Sudaroli
Founder, ICTRRR.
TLP Fellow - 2019.
Irula Tribe, Viluppuram,
Tamil Nadu.

In the Shade of Grass

Akli Tudu

Long ago, I read a Hindi poem by Avtar Singh Sandhu Pash. The last few lines translated to, 'I am grass. I will do what I do. I will grow over all your doings' (मैं घास हूँ, मैं अपना काम करुँगा, मैं आपके हर किए-धरे पर उग आऊंगा). I think Pash was referring to people like me — those whom the world tries to bury but we keep growing back.

I was born in a poor and large tribal family in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. We were seven children. As marginal farmers, my parents had to also work as farm labourers to make ends meet. We faced many hardships because of which we could not live in peace. I was barely six years old when our house was burned down. I was still inside it when it happened. A kind old lady pulled me out in time. We were left with nothing.

I was a good student, in fact one of the best in my class. No one pursued education for girls at that time. When it was time for high school, my parents didn't let me go because it was far. The other option was to stay in a hostel. While my parents tried their best to provide for us, this was beyond their humble capacity. I could only study till standard VII. Soon, to support my family, I started working full-time as a tutor for younger students.

I got married when I was 18. My new home was 10 kilometres away from my parent's house. It was an arranged marriage. As it was usual, I never got a chance to meet the groom before the wedding, let alone know him. He turned out to be an alcoholic, compulsive gambler, and a cheat. My dreams of a loving marital life came crashing.

It was easy to give up, but I decided that I needed to keep working. That way I could support myself and hopefully persuade my husband to mend his ways. My husband and in-laws tried to discourage me from working, but I pushed on. This did not go down well with them. They would regularly beat me; they even tried to bar me from leaving the house.

After eight years of misery, in 2012, my family finally found out about the constant abuse I was facing. My elder brother helped me join a Women's Self Help Group (SHG). With his support, I started attending SHG meetings on a regular basis. I was given the responsibility of bookkeeping. I also had a chance to learn modern farm practices.

In due course, I figured that I will never have an amicable relationship with my husband and in-laws. Now, I stay with my parents and work on social and environmental issues. My elder brother works with an NGO, the next one is a teacher in a government school, and the youngest one works in the local government office. Two of my sisters are married, while the youngest stays with us.

In 2014, I was working on a livelihood programme. We are heavily dependent on agriculture, and irrigation is critical to sustenance. We had started an initiative to conserve and divert water to the fields. Our area is notorious for Maoist insurgency. The gunmen would stay hidden in the jungle during the day and come out to our villages at night. They would demand levy against any development work in the area, be it government-led or private. Our project was powered by people. When we said that we don't have any money to pay them, they threatened to kill my family and me. The whole village was covered with threatening posters that said we will be killed unless I relent. I didn't.
I worked with the conviction that this is people's work. I had not taken even a rupee from anyone for it. So, I went to the police and asked for protection. There were two attempts on my life; I survived. The police were very cooperative.

Between 2014, when we started, and 2020, we constructed more than 70 ponds and water tanks. We also facilitated clean drinking water supply to seven middle schools in our subdivision. We have helped 800 families across two subdivisions to start their own fisheries and integrated farming. I am also working with more than 3,000 families in inaccessible areas to ensure that they get farm inputs like seeds and fertilisers on

time. We have created market linkages for them, using which they sell their produce. I tried to connect people with disabilities, single women without any means of income, and below poverty line families with government schemes.

I have one message for anyone reading this — dream big.

I faced poverty, brutality, and many dark days. I could have started working as a daily-wage labourer and been content with it. I did not settle. I decided to do what my heart told me to.

I work to empower girls and women who are caught in situations of violence and abuse. I counsel parents to accord the same status to girls they accord to boys. I work against oppressive practices like the dowry system.

It took me years to overcome my fears and the challenges life threw my way. My faith was stronger than my brokenness.

As I said, I am grass.

Akli Tudu
Founder, Jumid Tirla Gawnta (Ekta Mahila Samiti).
TLP Fellow - 2018.
Mahli Tribe, East Singhbhum, Jharkhand.

In Search of Me

Asha M.

I wish I could say otherwise, but at best mine was an unhappy childhood. When I was three years old, my father left us without a word. I had two older sisters; my mother was expecting my younger brother. We were left with no choice but to move in with my maternal grandparents who lived in the nearby hamlet of Anakanathapura in Heggadadevankote administrative subdivision in Mysuru district of Karnataka.

My mother's was a large joint family. It fell upon her to manage the household. We were daughters, hence very openly discriminated against. In the Badaga Yerava tribe, girls are seen as burdens. Parents want them married off early. Their education is given no importance.

Many of my peers dropped out in middle school; anyway the high school was difficult to reach and deemed unsafe for girls to commute to. Education held so little value, even for boys. The only reason my siblings and I kept at it was because my mother was adamant; she wanted higher education for all of us.

Historians say, centuries ago the Yeravas were probably a semi-nomadic tribe in the forested hills of Kerala's Wayanad area. As the feudal system grew, they were held in slavery by upper caste Hindu families. Subsequently, they migrated to the high-altitude forests of Coorg (now, Kodagu), in Karnataka. They comprise four endogamous subgroups — Panjiri, Pani, Badava, and Kaji. During the colonial rule, coffee, tea, and spices of the region gained traction in the European markets. Commercial plantations replaced forests. Traders migrated into the region and acquired more forest for development. Deprived of their habitual homes in the woods, the Yeravas were forced to become plantation workers.

A census report of 1981, titled The Yeravas of Kodagu, mentions a few other theories: "Apart from the fact that in the past members of these communities were agricultural labourers more or less permanently attached to the landlords, nothing much is known about their identity — whether these groups represent branches of a single tribe sharing a common origin or whether these represent different communities which have been integrated into a single tribe with a specific regional or socio-political order to form a hierarchy of sub-tribes. It is of interest to note at this juncture that Badaga is also an independent tribe. According to Edgar Thurston: 'As the Todas are the pastoral, and the Kotas the artisan tribe of the Nilgiris, so the agricultural element on these hills is represented by the Badagas... The name Badaga or Vadugan means northerner, and the Badagas are believed to be descended from Canarese colonists from the Mysuru (sic) country, who migrated to the Nilgiris three centuries ago owing to famine, political turmoil, or local oppression in their own country'."

As a tribal researcher, I know that most history and government reports are neither written by indigenous people, nor in their languages, or by people who understand their languages. There is much that is lost in translation. But our elders say my particular community comes from the Badagas who were compelled by circumstance to move to Mysuru and adapt to mainstream language and social conditions. We speak the state language of Kannada even among ourselves.

Because the quality of education available in the village school was of poor quality and unreliably delivered, my mother sent us away to an ashram school in Penjahalli village. Ashram schools were introduced by the government in the 1960s under the Department of Tribal Welfare. They are residential schools up to the secondary level only for children belonging to poor Scheduled Tribes to access free education, nutrition, and skills. In reality, we had one qualified teacher; some classes were covered by the cook and the security guard, and the less said about the food the better.

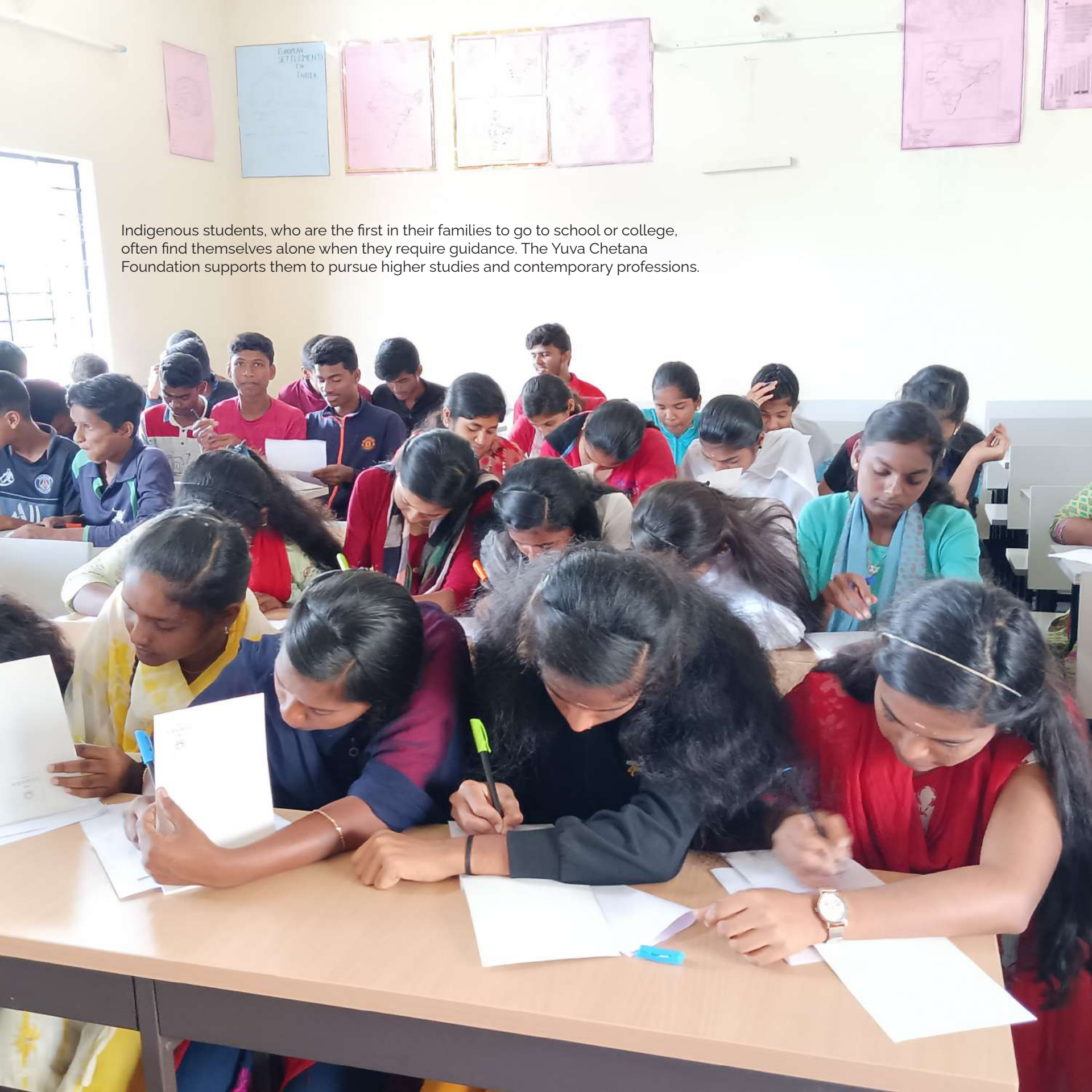
In middle school, we had to stay at the Social Welfare Department-run hostel. The systems were alien to us. We didn't get enough to eat. Most classmates dropped out. They became plantation workers. Parents did not think of their future, the children did not think about what a degree and a job could do for them; they got married early and continued to be labourers.

My mother got married when she was 14. My father left her when she was 27. Destiny had made her a labourer and a single mother, but she dreamt that we will have good jobs and be independent. So, my siblings and I persisted.

S. Sreekanth, of Development through Education (DEED), said that nobody in the government was serious about uplifting the standards of the ashram schools. "There is an ashram school in Neralukuppe village in Hunsur taluk which has been functioning for 60 years, but so far it has not produced a single graduate."

Social activist M. B. Prabhu and his team recently completed an informal survey of the 116 ashram schools in Karnataka. They found that the dropout rate is very high, and even those who reach senior secondary are unable to read or write properly. "The highest post the tribals from Mysuru region aspire to reach is that of a mahout (elephant rider) or a forest watcher which does not require any specific qualification," Prabhu said.

Indigenous students, who are the first in their families to go to school or college, often find themselves alone when they require guidance. The Yuva Chetana Foundation supports them to pursue higher studies and contemporary professions.



My eldest sister graduated from school and got a seat in a college. She was the first girl in our community to go so far. But the village elders said she would certainly be taken advantage of and will 'stray'. My family was ostracised. The hardships we faced were unimaginable; even today the memories hurt. Her success paved the way for the rest of us. When I was in Standard X, out of the 44 girl students in my batch, I was the only one who passed with a first class. In the pre-university batch, I was the only girl from my village.

Given my academic record and financial background, I received a sponsorship from my college lecturer Sarvani. She said, 'Remember to do something for your community'. That was her only stipulation and I never let myself forget it. Once I finished college, I pursued a post-graduation in Social Work.

Soon after, the Tribal Research Institute, which is an independent arm of the Karnataka Government, introduced a new study centre for the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) and forest tribes. The government happened to be looking for a tribal person with a degree in Social Work. I was selected.

Our focus area comprised settlements of two primitive tribes and ten forest tribes, for whom there are specific government schemes available. We work on evaluating needs and ensuring the implementation of the schemes. In my first year, I completed a Central Government project. Until then, no research worker had stayed in their assigned villages for even a few days. I lived in the villages for nine months and gathered data. My approach created a benchmark of sorts for my peers.

In 2017, I attended the Samvaad. Up until then I wasn't even aware that my cultural heritage and identity was in danger. I was focussed only on economic security. The thousands of people from hundreds of tribes I met there increased my understanding of the crisis of indigenous people across the world. I even met a Yerava elder who showed me how to drape a saree as per our tradition.

The conclave inspired me to apply for a fellowship under it — the Tribal Leadership Programme — in 2018. The motivation and the learnings I received there, both internal and external, opened up a new direction of thought.

With my TLP peers, Bharath Devaiah and Krishna Murthy, I run the Yuva Chetana Foundation (YCF). Thousands of tribal youth live in poverty, neglect, and demoralisation. Youth, who are the first in their families to go to school or college, often find themselves alone when they require guidance or support to pursue higher studies and contemporary professions. YCF builds socio-political consciousness, awareness, and capacity for youth to go for education streams of their choice so that they find empowering livelihoods.

We work with dropout students in eight tribal districts — understanding their issues, motivating and counselling them, providing them information and academic assistance for higher degrees and diplomas, and connecting them to aid organisations and scholarships should they need financial support. We encourage the participation of compassionate, educated and informed youth in local governance.

My struggles have not been in vain, nor have my achievements. I have found a beautiful way to pay it forward.

A stationery distribution drive by the Yuva Chetna Foundation.

Asha M.
Founder, Yuva Chetana Foundation.
TLP Fellow - 2018.
Yerava Tribe, Mysuru, Karnataka.

Ara-Keram of Our Dreams

Dubeshwar Bediya

I am from Jharkhand, the land of forests, streams, hills and diversity — with more than 30 indigenous groups native to our state, living in villages that are remote and poor.

Higher education was a challenge. In 2010, to be able to attend high school in Ranchi city, I had to cycle 70 kilometres every day, for two years. Right before I could start my Bachelors' degree, I lost my father. Being the eldest among my siblings, I had to shoulder the responsibility of providing for my family. My heart still longed for studies and a year later, with much struggle, I rejoined college. Two years in, I had to give up yet again due to financial distress in the family.

I started tutoring 20 children in the village to earn a living. But this didn't satisfy me. I was not doing anything for my people. So I got involved with social service. Since 1990, we have had a committee of villagers to protect our forest. The group had ten members. If any member faced any trouble, others pitched in to help. Even after all this, the community lived in extreme poverty; alcoholism had become a bane.

When Siddharth Tripathi, an Indian Forest Service officer, who is also the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) Commissioner, came to our village, he was curious to understand the reason behind the deprivation of our village Ara-Keram. Through conversations, we figured that most of us wasted money on some form of intoxication — tobacco, hadia (a rice beer), and alcohol.

It was not that people didn't understand the problem earlier, but the way he phrased it had a deep impact on us. He explained that even if each person chewed tobacco worth ₹10 per week, it added to ₹480 per year per person. A village of 100 tobacco-chewing people is spending ₹48,000 per year on spitting! Similarly, he explained that even at just ₹50 per person per day spent on liquor, we were wasting ₹1,500 every day. Over a year, ₹18,00,000 was wasted on intoxication — hard-earned money that can be used to take care of the essential needs of our families. We were awakened. About 15 of us took an oath to shun every form of intoxication.

Tripathi suggested that we go and check out the good work being done by the villagers of Simarkundi in Koderma district of Jharkhand. 25 of us went and were amazed to see that the forest village had enforced prohibition and was using modern agricultural practices to improve their livelihoods.

On our return, we called for a Gram Sabha meeting and resolved to enforce total prohibition. No one was to make or consume any intoxicant. We resolved to counsel and assist the addicts. We also decided that those who still did not follow the rules would be sanctioned and punished as necessary. In case someone still didn't agree, we decided to strip them of benefits of government schemes for life. These measures might appear harsh to outsiders, but our lives had become so pitiful, we needed to be tough on ourselves.

Then we went to Gufu village and saw the inspiring work done by the women there. They had planted mango trees on a 12-acre plot of land to generate additional income. We decided to implement a similar model in our village.

On January 20, 2017, the Forest Department sponsored a field trip for 35 villagers to Maharashtra and experience the phenomenal work undertaken by social leader Anna Hazare in his village Ralegan Siddhi. That village had a similar problem of addiction. Anna's campaign against it and the transformation that followed is a model that has been widely studied and implemented. We also learnt the work they have done in the area of watershed management and forest management. We studied how they have promoted education, health, and overall development. We were impressed with how they had used animal husbandry and poultry to supplement their livelihoods. The way they lived, behaved and worked — it all inspired us.

After a week of training, we started creating our own plans. We set up a committee of villagers which we named Nav Jagriti Samiti. It means the New Awakening Committee. We resolved to be guided by eight tenets: voluntary labour, prohibition, ban on open defecation, restriction on cattle grazing, ban on felling, ban on deep boring, family planning, and ban on dowry.

This has been a long road to transformation.

Now, our people pitch in with voluntary labour that helps us take up larger village projects every month. The roads are swept and cleaned every day. There is an announcement over the public address system at 4 am. We get up and go about our business. No one drinks or brews alcohol in the village. When we started, the women rounded up all the utensils that were used to brew alcohol and sold them off. Our village is open-defecation free. No one lets their cattle off to graze by themselves: we feed them at home or the grazing is supervised. We have banned people from carrying axes to the forest to ensure a complete ban on felling.

Since we stripped the defaulters of all government benefits for life, the

measures worked. Soon, Ara-Keram was declared intoxication-free. Our efforts were recognised by the Jharkhand Government. We received an award of ₹1,00,000.

The Way Forward

We are concentrating on four focus areas: environmental conservation, water conservation, organic farming, animal husbandry and education.

We are managing forestland of over 400 acres. We have not only conserved what was there, but have also planted more trees. We have flourishing flora and a healthy population of wildlife. Using the power of community voluntary labour, we have dug trenches in a 75-acre area. This stops the rainwater that used to run off. Using MGNREGA, we have built more trenches and bunds in an 85-acre area. During the pandemic-led lockdown in 2020, we decided to work on an initiative to harvest the run-off water from the hills. People worked in the forest from 9 am till 5 pm to help build 750 Loose Boulder Structures (LBS) in a 400-acre area in 75 days. Some of this was funded by MGNREGA, while the rest was availed through community participation.

Organic farming comes naturally to us. We never used chemical fertilisers or pesticides. In the last few decades, in a mad rush to get more produce, people had jumped on the bandwagon. We started an initiative wherein each one of us would cultivate organic crops in one decimal (1 decimal = 0.004 acre) of land. Its success encouraged us and soon it spread over larger areas.

Farming and rearing animals cannot and shouldn't be separated. Animal husbandry is an integral part of our way of life. Again, we used the power of MGNREGA and collectively built 84 animal sheds. Today, villagers are rearing cows, buffaloes, pigs, and goats to supplement their income.

Education is perhaps the most important part of this development journey. Ara-Keram has a government school. With 70 students, it only had two para-teachers. We called for a Gram Sabha meeting and steadily built capacity. We engaged educated youth from the village and two teachers. Today, our school has 13 teachers and caters to more than 240 students. The best part is that these teachers are directly responsible to the Gram Sabha.

With constant efforts, the benefits we have reaped and the recognition we have received have kept us going. The Jharkhand Government has awarded us a cash prize of ₹4,00,000 for the forest conservation work. For our water conservation and health initiatives, we have received the second prize at Sant Ishwar Award in New Delhi. The prize included a cash award of ₹5,00,000 and a shield. The Union Jal Shakti Ministry has also awarded us with ₹1,50,000 for our work with water conservation.

We have proven that with selfless service and a strong sense of community, people can solve any problem. I hope people who read about the story of transformation of Ara-Keram, will take inspiration to create their own Ara-Kerams.

Dubeshwar Bediya
Farmer, Social Activist,
TLP Fellow - 2019.
Bediya Tribe, Ranchi,

We Didn't Start the Fire

Dr. Satish Gogulwar

Mainstream development models have failed to ensure a minimum wellbeing for a large part of humanity, and severely compromised the long-term security of both humans and animals. The habitats of indigenous peoples and other traditional communities are being obliterated due to reckless industrial growth and development. The communities are not only resisting the onslaught of 'accumulation by dispossession', but are also emphasising the urgency of looking for viable alternatives.

In Korchi taluka of Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district, villagers are vigorously resisting state-sponsored mining. The Gram Sabhas (general assembly of all eligible voters in a village) of Korchi are actively reimagining and revamping local governance institutions by employing traditional and modern knowledge systems and by forming taluka-level federations. Ninety out of 133 Gram Sabhas have come together to form a collective they call Maha Gram Sabha (Greater Gram Sabha). Similarly, women's collectives have federated and formed the Mahila Parisar Sangh, not only to resist indiscriminate mining, but also to make themselves heard in the village and taluka-level decision-making institutions.

The collectives are emerging as platforms to resist mining, localise the economy, restore ecological balance through biodiversity, revive cultural identity and articulate social concerns. The platforms also help drive direct grassroots democracy and interrogate existing models of development (including conventional systems of health and education), among others. All of this is largely driven by people-to-people exchanges, and regular dialogue at all levels (village, taluka and district). It is important to understand that these platforms are emerging in the context of social and environmental injustices faced by the tribes.

The injustices are deeply linked to the political economy of the region during pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. In post-Independence India, the continuation of colonial, centralised, top-down decision-making processes, privatisation of common resources, and extractive, commercially-motivated economic policies have perpetuated the injustice. As a result, the indigenous worldview and relationship with the forests have come in direct conflict with state policy, leading to a long history of rebellion and resistance.

These have included armed Maoist movements claiming to seek social justice through greater autonomy for the local people. Other movements have sought to achieve the same using both collaboration and non-violent resistance, compelling the state to bring about reformative change. The indigenous women's movement has militated against the oppressive and exclusionary systems of gender discrimination within their communities.

The conflicting groups represent diametrically opposite views: the adivasis want political decentralisation and view Nature as integral to human wellbeing; the state believes in greater centralisation and views Nature as a resource for fuelling consumption and economic growth. The resistance movements have led to various transformative processes across the district at different points in time, the Mendha-Lekha village being a classic example that emerged from the Manav Bachao, Jungle Bachao (Save Man, Save the Jungles) movement of the 1980s.

In the late 1990s, it was proposed that some parts of the forests in Korchi taluka be leased out for mining. This led to a strong resistance movement questioning development that is based on the destruction of Nature and cultures.

Simultaneously, alternative development models received a huge boost with the enactment of two radical legislations: the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), 2006, and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Maharashtra Rules (PESA), 2014.

The provisions of these laws and the manner in which they were implemented provided an opportunity to practise local conceptions of wellbeing, leading to political and economic decentralisation, which helped engender caste, class, and gender adjustments. These also enabled decentralised learning and exchange opportunities, and modern methods of forest management and conservation.

Korchi's resistance has been (and in some ways continues to be) against exploitative models of development and centralised forest laws and policies designed to gain greater control over water, forest, and land. The struggle has also impacted the economic, political, cultural, and social aspects of community life.

While we describe in detail all aspects of transformation in Korchi, we analyse in particular the three mentioned below using the Alternative Transformation Framework (ATF).

1. Political decentralisation engenders direct democracy: Achieving greater autonomy for Gram Sabhas and greater accountability for state institutions, particularly local and administrative institutions. We see how these processes were catalysed and precipitated by the FRA and PESA.

The collection season for mahua, which is a major non-timber forest produce in central India.

2. Localised, equitable, and transparent economy: The assertion of rights over traditional forests and forest produce, particularly the extraction and sale of two commercially important Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) — tendu leaves and bamboo — along with hundreds of other forest produce which are not a significant part of the monetary economy but play a significant role in sustaining village societies in multiple ways.
3. Wellbeing of people and forests: Understanding the positive impact of the above processes and the hurdles in their way. Understanding the perception of well-being among people involved in bringing about these changes. And finally, understanding the actions taken towards ensuring the wellbeing of the forests themselves.

Unique support role played by Amhi Amchi Arogyasaathi (AAA)

AAA has worked on health, education and other social welfare projects in the area, and is an important facilitator of local processes. AAA team members have often gone above and beyond their responsibilities to help local resistance and transformation processes. It has played an important role in identifying local leaders, appointing them as karyakartas (heads) of various projects, and paying their wages. Although these karyakartas have specific project-related responsibilities, they also play an important role in local processes. The karyakartas have benefitted from wider exposure as they travelled outside the region, interacted with actors at the district, state, and national levels, and participated in various discussions and debates. Some of the women leaders at the village and taluka level, who have played an instrumental role in the movement against mining, mobilising women's collectives, and enabling transformation processes, have also been directly and indirectly supported by AAA.

AAA does not work in all the villages in Korchi taluka. The villages where it has worked on different projects are among those taking leadership roles in the movement and enabling transformation processes — villages such as Zendepar, Sahle and Bharitola. Although the projects work under constraints like duration-based financial support, some of them have led to spin-offs that have had significant consequences for the local people. Among the most significant are women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

AAA also plays an important role in helping procure and share information, like the information on mining leases in 2009. Naturally, such information helps the anti-mining movement. AAA organises training and awareness workshops on a range of issues related to the wellbeing of the community, including health, forest, education, FRA, PESA, and women's empowerment. When required, AAA helps the Gram Sabhas on technical aspects. Of late, it has also helped with the development plans of some villages supported by the state Tribal Department.

People of Korchi taluka in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra on their annual pilgrimage to the sacred forest-hills of Zendepar. From an occasion of faith, the pilgrimage has evolved into a religio-social resistance against mining.

Role of Maha Gram Sabha and Gram Sabha during the pandemic

After the FRA recognised community forest rights, every village was recognised as an independent Gram Sabha. Each of these opened bank accounts. They also got Permanent Account Number (PAN) cards made, which are used in relation to taxation.

Since 2017, with the help of the Korchi Maha Gram Sabha, all 90 Gram Sabhas auction their tendu leaves independently. The amounts received from the auction of tendu leaves by each Gram Sabha is deposited in their accounts. About 80 percent of this is distributed as wages to the villagers (tendu collectors) and 20 percent is retained as the Gram Sabha community fund. Individual Gram Sabhas have funds running into lakhs.

During the pandemic many Gram Sabhas distributed grocery kits to the villagers from their funds. Two Gram Sabhas used some of the money to start a school for village children. During the 2020 lockdown, collection of mahua and tendu leaves and agricultural work continued smoothly. Both mahua and tendu are major sources of livelihood for the tribals.

Dr. Gogulwar has been involved in social work right from his days as an MBBS student in Nagpur. He has worked with Dr. Abhay Bang and Dr. Rani Bang in community health. He has also worked with indigenous healers and helped train thousands to identify and prepare simple herbal medicines for use in Primary Health Centres. He has worked on home-based neonatal care for tribal children and helped halve the child mortality rate in this area. He has also written books and papers on tribal medicines, and maternal and child health.

Besides malnutrition and child mortality, his organisation AAA works on indigenous livelihoods and health practices, women's empowerment through SHGs, and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities.

Coffee, Conversations, and Peace in Bodoland

Morin Daimary

I was born with a stammer. I grew up talking little in public, even less with strangers, almost nothing in a social situation. I smiled and I listened.

All the time I spent avoiding conversations, I observed people. I mostly saw them wanting to talk and share, without really wanting to hear the other person; preparing to respond even before the other person had finished. I saw the quiet, non-articulate, shy ones ignored.

I grew up. My stammer became imperceptible. I had begun to find myself, but my homeland had not.

I am Morin Daimary. I am 30 years old. I belong to the Bodo tribe and live in Kokrajhar in Bodoland, which is an autonomous region in the state of Assam. I am a graduate with a Geography major, and have a post-graduate diploma in human rights. I lost my father when I was 10 years old. As the news of my father's death reached home, the silent midnight was upturned; people were screaming and crying. I kept asking the elders what had happened. It is a memory of pain I carry. Along with others.

My people, the Bodos, the largest tribe in the Northeast, are concentrated in four contiguous districts of Assam — Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri and Chirang, comprising about six percent of the state's population. Some of us also live in West Bengal and the neighbouring country of Nepal. Being the earliest inhabitants, we controlled large parts of Assam till about the mid-19th century. Then the history of marginalisation began.

In 1929, Kalicharan Brahma, a social and religious reformer, was the first to submit a memorandum to the then colonial rulers. About two decades later, the Constituent Assembly of free India turned a deaf ear to the demand for a tribal homeland; the narrative of disaffection intensified.

The simmering Bodo demand gained force during the Assam Movement (1979-1985), an intense assertion of Assamese identity; it forced the Bodos to launch a counter. In 1987, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) leader Upendra Nath Brahma spearheaded a resistance against the Assamese hegemony, in particular the imposition of Assamese language.

No justification has been good enough for our demand for statehood to be honoured; at best we have received, from time to time, uneasy, short-lived resolutions.

We were fighting to safeguard our land rights, scrambling for basic economic opportunities, for education and infrastructure. By the 1990s, our relationship with immigrant 'East Bengal' Muslims and other central Indian tribes settled here by the British colonialists to work in their tea estates — Santal, Munda and Oraon — had also begun to break down.

It erupted into the violent riots of 2012. Rising from the ashes of violence, finally, we began to see the need for peace through dialogue and deep interventions. I was 21. I joined those working towards a peaceful resolution.

In 2016, a bomb blast in the busy Balajan Tinali market killed 14 people. National headlines screamed: Bodos Bomb Assam's Meat Market. I was deeply disturbed. When did all Bodos become militants? How did the entire tribe get labelled as criminals? We, the student unions, held a meeting with the community leaders.

Thus began the Red Rose campaign. I posted an open letter to the publishers on social media, pointing out the glaring injustice of headlines. Alongside, we sent them roses. All of them, bar none, tendered public apologies. It was like magic; our non-violent approach had worked.

In 2017, my younger brother met with a near-fatal bike accident. He was hospitalised with multiple skull fractures, maxillary bone fractures, and facial palsy. It was a miracle he survived. But a deep fear of losing loved ones consumed me. This kind of misfortune plays out much more intensely where I live; the constant battles and bullets take a toll on mental health.

In 2019, when I was chosen for the Samvaad Tribal Leadership Programme (TLP), the spell broke. It was as if I was reborn. I used to let my anxiety about my stammer get the better of me. During the TLP, I accepted that there is no shame in being who I truly am. The exercises in our workshops, both individual and group activities, helped me let go of resentments and reconcile with friends and family. The kind of dialogue and trust-building exercises that helped me, I felt, could also bring about a positive change in my region.

So, on my return, I took a loan from a bank and opened the Express Corner Cafe. It was a safe space for dialogues and discussions. It provided a platform for budding singers, musicians, poets. We had storytelling workshops and jams.

In January 2020, the Bodoland Movement created history. The Bodo Peace Accord was signed; all the rebel groups laid down their arms and

came together for peace talks. Our region is now called the Bodoland Territorial Region; we have signed up for wider autonomy within Assam as against the previous demand for separate statehood. There is a kind of trust in the community that was not there five or seven years ago.

However, even before our first elections could be held, Covid-19 struck. When India declared lockdown, everyone was caught unprepared. My peers — Kansai Brahma (TLP Fellow), Mainao Basumatary, Satyaki Banerjee, Cornolio Iswary — and I started a support group.

The lockdown led to a huge reverse-migration across India. Millions of people work in the unorganised sector. As the country shut down and jobs disappeared overnight, they began to return. However, thousands got stuck mid-way. India's migrant workers, trying to reach home without money, food, transport, were vulnerable. The people from the Northeast more so. This is because in mainland India, on account of how we look, we face discrimination and othering.

We coordinated with the police, hospitals, NGOs and local governments to ease this humanitarian crisis. A migrant worker, who fell from a running train on his way home, was stuck in Srikakulam, badly injured, with no food to eat, no place to stay. People were reluctant to help him. Finally after two days, a kind man gave him his phone. That is when he could contact us and was rescued. Four people working in a fishing company got stranded without money in Kolhapur. Through our network, we housed them with a family in a village nearby. In another instance, a landlord evicted seven workers. We involved government agencies and got them rehoused. We helped about 1,000 workers in different locations.

Our biggest success was in Taloja, Maharashtra, where 7,000 workers from the Northeast live. Without work, after the first few weeks, they had no food or essentials left. We connected them with local NGOs, but they needed a much bigger intervention. We worked hard to get the government's attention and officials stepped in with relief.

On the personal front, I hit bankruptcy; my cafe shut down for good.

As winter set in, it was time for the elections. In December 2020, the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), overwhelmingly won against its closest rival, the Bodoland People's Front, which had ruled the Bodo constituencies for 17 years, sometimes in alliance with the National Democratic Front, at other times with the United Progressive Alliance.

I had already joined the UPPL cadre. I was appointed a central office secretary. I mostly work with its non-profit verticals dealing with humanitarian aid and biodiversity conservation.

During my journey, I have been able to mentor many young professionals who believe in peace. We have been without it for too long. The armed struggle has set us back in entrepreneurship, education, sports, digital economy, and science and innovation. I dream of a Bodoland where peace and prosperity are louder than guns.

The Bodo people and the tea tribes of Assam are collectively working towards sustainable peace.

Morin Daimary
Officebearer,
United People's Party Liberal.
TLP Fellow - 2018.
Bodo Tribe, Kokrajhar, Assam.

Reach Out Your Hand

Naren Chaudhari

Thousands and thousands of tired feet, walking on sweltering highways for days, homeward bound. Away from the cities where their jobs had disappeared almost overnight. Men. Women. Young. Old. Their meagre personal possessions on their backs. I was haunted by these images of workers of India that had flooded social media and news following the nationwide lockdown. It was a migration of desperation of an unprecedented kind.

I was the village head of Kacchal village in Gujarat's Surat district; I always wanted a life in public. I had to do something. I started a WhatsApp group of my network of contacts and posted a message promising to reach out to the walking workers and their families with transportation. Thus, Operation Roadlift was born.

My phone was flooded with distress calls and messages. Between March 26, 2020 and March 31, 2020, our group helped over 3,500 people, largely women and children, reach their homes in over 60 villages. Our initial plan was to only help workers passing our area, but seeing the exhausted walkers we decided to expand the radius. The group dropped people from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra till the state borders — which was as far as the authorities would allow us to go.

The operation was initially funded with our personal savings, but as requests kept pouring in, we reached out to donors. We set up temporary kitchens to feed people. Apart from initial temperature screening, and mask and sanitiser distribution, we also ensured that those we were ferrying were screened by doctors once they reached home.

The people of our community really stepped up to help strangers in this hour of crisis. However, they are poor and marginalised. They are unable to articulate their aspirations. We want to be their voice so that people know that there are tribes who live here, and that they want to live their lives in their own way without being dictated to.

I have decided to contest the Legislative Assembly elections. However, whether I contest as an Independent or with a party, my priorities will remain non-negotiable. My community will always come before the party.

Let me explain why. I am a farmer from the Chaudhari tribe. We are all tribal farmers here — the rural Sabarkantha-Dahod-Surat-Tapi-Navsari belt is largely indigenous. Yet, look at the power structure. At the district level of governance, all those who have managed to be elected to power are from non-indigenous communities. Our protest letters against this injustice are lying unread in the files of the District Collector and the Election Commission offices.

There is no one to take up the objections we have been raising about the gross corruption that people from other population categories are resorting to, to get false Scheduled Tribe certificates. This allows them to hoodwink the system and get government jobs, admissions in educational institutes, concessions, and even contest polls from election seats reserved for us. By law, they should face a jail term; instead, they are becoming lawmakers. In the January 2021, district council elections, all our reserved seats were contested and cornered by non-tribal candidates.

There is also no one to take on the projects threatening our very existence. The first is the Bharatmala Pariyojana, a Central Government roads and highways project to build the largest high-speed road network across the country. Under it comes the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway project. Officially, the government has said that the primary justification for choosing the route, which is different from the earlier map, is that it would reduce the cost of land acquisition as it passes through "backward and tribal" districts in Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Which means, our farmlands and homes will be acquired for a road we have no use for.

In July 2021, we were tear-gassed by the police when the public hearing for a smelter plant turned into a protest in the tribal villages of Doswada in Tapi. We are protesting because the project will pollute the land, air, and soil along with the Mindhola river, by which 2,00,000 tribals live.
When the projects are presented to us, each time we are told that they will bring us more livelihoods and economic prosperity. Ask the tribes whose lands have been acquired. They are now landless, the compensation money is long gone, they have got no job; most of them have migrated to cities for menial jobs. They were not rich, but not so long ago, they had homes, lands, and a way of life. All gone!

The biggest challenge is the protection of tribal homelands. India's first tribal magazine Gondwana Darshan, a thought leader in the indigenous literary and activism space, hosted me on a Facebook Live event. I don't think I am a good public speaker, but I spoke from my heart, urging tribal youth to participate in politics and rights movements.

The Samvaad Tribal Leadership Programme plays an ongoing role in empowering our leaders. Indigenous youth from across India gather here; it has become a platform that brings us together. We are able to open up about our fears and desires. We collaborate in different ways.

Samvaad plays an equally important role. Indigenous people from across India converge at the conclave. The regional editions of Samvaad travel to about 10 locations each year; I want smaller editions of Samvaad in every tribal community represented in our fellowship. It will give our people enormous confidence and exposure. We need more leaders, more change makers.

Naren Chaudhari
Political and Social Worker.
Former Sarpanch, Kacchal.
TLP Fellow - 2019
Chaudhari Tribe, Surat, Gujarat.

Following the First Peoples

Vijayasingh Ronald David

Growing up on a coffee plantation in Karnataka in the late 1960s, I saw some adivasi (indigenous or tribal) settlements closely. Theirs was a simple life; living by the forests, they seemed content with what they had.

Over two decades hence, in 1984, I got my first opportunity to work with a tribe, when some community leaders came to our organisation asking for guidance to form a farmers' collective. They were also concerned about the education of their children. They were the Soliga people, from Kanakapura near Bengaluru. Contractors hired them to cut trees and prepare charcoal. Sometimes, they were also hired to plant eucalyptus trees. When we visited their hadi (village), we found men with swollen bellies, and very high miscarriage rates among mothers. Both are signs of undernutrition and acute poverty that had been brought about by their ouster from their forest homes.

Changes in law and policy favoured commercial forests. Traditional forests were replaced with teak, eucalyptus, and acacia plantations. These trees do not bear fruits or fodder, nor contribute to biodiversity. But the Forest Department spent a lot of money to protect the timber by installing solar fencing and digging elephant trenches. The Soligas too were not allowed inside anymore, in spite of Constitutional provisions that protect indigenous rights to their ancestral habitats and forest produce. With old livelihoods gone, many had become labourers in plantations. Others, who lived in the margins of the forests and had been able to retain small land holdings, could barely make ends meet.

With our assistance, the Soligas organised themselves under the Budakattu Krishikara Sangha (BKS) — the Tribal Cultivators' Association. We also helped them get 20 heads of cattle, which they wanted for farm work and milk. That year they ploughed 60 acres of land and cultivated ragi (millet) and vegetables. With some of the income they admitted 45 children in schools for the first time.

This might have been a small success, but it had a larger impact. BKS started reaching out to other hadis to bring Soliga, Betta Kurubas, Jenu Kurubas, Male Kudiyas people together. Within a year, 18 hadis had joined hands and begun to take up common issues. They stood confident as they protested against the excesses of the police, government officials, and landlords. They fought for rightful access to forest and protection against eviction by commercial and industrial interests. They also successfully campaigned against luxury hotel projects inside the eco-sensitive Nagarahole National Park, and even stalled an environmentally unviable World Bank-funded project.

Seeing them fight for their forest rights, other tribal communities joined BKS. Seeing them together helped us understand their distinct languages, religious practices, dances, cultures, and value systems.

We found that traditionally the Jenu Kurubas, Betta Kurubas, and Yeravas used to be named after vegetables, trees, animals, colours, and body shapes. Non-indigenous school teachers found this strange; so they renamed the students after film actors and Hindu gods and goddesses. Even today, many young adivasis think if they change their names they will find greater acceptance.

The Soligas have a social system called kuduvali, which means 'to join together'. If a boy and a girl like each other, they can elope to the forest and stay there for three days. When they come back they are accepted as husband and wife. They are not puritanical about sex; sex education starts at an early age. But kuduvali is a crime under the Protection of Children From Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. As a result, many young boys were booked and sent to jail. Thanks to the awareness generated by Childline 1098, the Labour Department, and the Women and Child Welfare Department, the problem has somewhat reduced now. They also celebrate a festival called Kudrehabba or Kunde Habba, which literally means the 'bum festival'. On this day, they wear fancy dresses (with men often dressed like women) and curse their oppressors. They don't spare district collectors, superintendents of police, or even local landlords.

Many adivasis do not believe in private property; land is held in common ownership. Even if someone has very little food, she or he will share it with a neighbour in crisis. If a child needs care while the parents have to be away, the village women will look after the baby like their own. In the case of an infant, lactating mothers will even breastfeed another woman's child. Husbands and wives go to the forest together to collect firewood and minor produce. When they collect honey, they do not take it all; they leave some for the bears and the birds. When they collect roots, they spare some pieces for rejuvenation. Adivasis treat various illnesses with traditional medicines, which are made of herbs, roots and tree barks. They used to hunt small animals. Now that hunting is prohibited by law, they say their brothers and sisters provide for them. By this they mean the portions left behind by big predators after a hunt; it is considered minor forest produce, which they are legally allowed to take. Husbands and wives also go to the weekly markets with each other. When women get their periods, the washing, cooking, cleaning, and household chores are taken care of by the husband.

The adivasis are obviously not Hindu, Christian, or Muslim; they have their own Nature gods and own religion called Adi Dharma (the Ancient Way).

As factors such as displacement and external influences alter lifestyles, tribal youth are looking at alternate forms of livelihoods.

A village elder at a Community Rights Sangama (meeting).

A traditional performance at a Sangama.

Unfortunately, they are forced to categorise themselves as Hindu in official documents, often without prior, informed consent. There is also a concern about some adivasis being converted to Christianity, even though I have not met any Christian adivasis in this region who have entered the faith because of coercion. If an adivasi recovered from an illness or escaped a bad turn of events after they prayed in a church, they converted. However, they also retained their Adi Dharma.

Young adivasis want motorcycles, mobile phones, and fashion. They aspire for non-traditional livelihoods that can afford them a modern lifestyle. This is at a time when the world is looking for paths to return to the old ways. We have to consider organic reforms. Adivasis are not enthused by classroom education. They prefer to roam free and learn from their parents and elders. The governments must seriously consider teaching subjects like biodiversity and conservation in their mother tongue; they will be exemplary. The government should also actively foster the Gram Sabhas — a grassroots-level direct democracy mechanism provided by the Constitution. This will empower adivasi systems of living.

Many non-adivasis fraudulently procure adivasi certificates to get free education, job opportunities, reservations, and grants. For example, the Betta Kuruba certificate is now issued as Kadu Kuruba, which is a generic term that was used in the olden days for anybody who lived in the forest.

The simplicity and Nature-centricity of adivasi life has the power to save the World. Scientists and conservationists know that for a fact now. If adivasis are evicted from their homelands, the forests and rivers will die. There will not be any biodiversity left for future generations. The planet will collapse.

Vijayasingh Ronald David is the national convener of the National Adivasis Alliance and the founder-director of the Coorg Organisation for Rural Development (CORD).

For years, he has worked for the economic and social emancipation of the small and marginal bonded farmers in coffee and tea plantations of Kodagu and Wayanad, and among landless agricultural labourers and tenant farmers in Mysuru and South Canara districts. He paid a heavy price for the cause; in a fight for justice that turned volatile, he lost his left hand and almost bled to death.

Committed to the cause of ecology and environment, he strongly believes that only community-led initiatives can truly safeguard our forests and natural resources. To this effect, he has produced a documentary called The Wings of Kokkerebellur. He has also published a book — Forest, Earth, Water, Sky: India's Indigenous People Fight for Community Rights.


Ripple **Effect**

Path to a Relevant Past

Dr. Sonam Wangchok

The last Shangri-La. A Himalayan utopia. Remote. Stunning. Steeped in cultural richness. The adjectives of travellers and poets reveal themselves slowly.

Ladakh has always been a tough terrain. With a pitiful annual rainfall which is less than 55 mm, an extremely rugged and harsh terrain, and sparse vegetation that lets the majestic mountains run barren, life in this cold desert is, at best, challenging. During the three-month winter, it is not uncommon for temperatures to drop between minus 25 and minus 30 degrees centigrade. Come summer, the high-altitude sun burns the eye.

Despite that, till a few decades ago, Ladakh was largely a self-sufficient agricultural society that used proven traditional practices. Tucked in its remote villages, in farming season, were stretches of terrace fields of vegetables, fruits, barley, wheat and potatoes in full growth. Food and water security was not a struggle.

Its efficient water management system, which is several centuries old, ensured the effective distribution of water to agricultural lands. Almost every village appointed a person known as the water manager (Chhu-dPon) who managed the distribution of water through irrigation channels.

Traditional houses were designed to overcome the severe cold, especially in the winter months. They were built of stone, wood, and sun-dried mud bricks — the floors and ceilings were plastered with clay. The animals were housed on the ground floor and the family shrine on the top floor. Rearing livestock provided food and clothing for the winter.

The architecture reflected sustainable practices. The buildings were insulated with mud, straw, grass, and the most important room was always to the south for sunlight and solar heat. The front elevation usually had an impressive layout, and roof parapets, doors, and windows showcased elaborate wood-carved decorations. Small doors and windows and low ceilings minimised loss of heat. This is how well-planned things were back in the day.

The majestic Lehchen Spalkhar (Leh Palace) of the 17th century and the heritage buildings below it are a fine example of Ladakhi architecture; communities have lived here for centuries, and they still stand tall.

This is the Ladakh its ancient tribes had built. They are the Balti Beda, Bot (or Boto), Brokpa (or Drokpa, Dard, Shin), Changpa, Garra, Mon and Purigpa tribes who form 90 percent of its population.

The turn of the century saw the beginning of modernisation and rapid development. It led to the extreme neglect of many traditional practices. We witnessed unplanned construction, abandonment of time-honoured agricultural practises, tremendous increase in the number of vehicles, mass migration from rural areas to Leh town, and the worrying consequences of global warming. The environmentally fragile region has also been compromised by a rigid, high-stakes education system that fosters competition rather than cooperation, a cash economy that compels people to earn wages through urban employment, and a lack of regard for religious practices.

Padma Shri awardee Chewang Norphel, popularly known as the Ice Man of Ladakh, has innovated artificial glaciers — to harvest wastewater from natural glaciers — to address the extreme water scarcity. There are 17 of them serving thousands of farmers, by increasing groundwater recharge, rejuvenating springs, and supplying water for irrigation.

The Go Green, Go Organic initiative by His Holiness Drikung Kyabgon Thinle Lhundup has been planting trees across the eastern ends, mainly in Durbuk, Tangtse, Tharuk, Shachukul, Phulak, Chushul, Yerath, Merak, Kargyam, Lalok, Maan, Phobrang and Mugleb. So far over 2,00,000 saplings of willows, seabuckthorn, and tamarisk have been planted.

The new university of the Union Territory holds promise of becoming a unique learning and research hub of programmes specific to Himalayan, trans-Himalayan and South and Central Asian regions. The contributions of Buddhist monasteries remain immense in preserving arts, crafts and rituals. Several youth and women's groups have been formed in different villages to tackle issues related to cultural and natural heritage. The Cultural Academy of Leh and Kargil is actively engaged in promoting local music, dances and songs through traditional festivals.

And, NGOs like our Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation (HCHF) have been working extensively to revive dying arts, rituals, and village handicrafts. The foundation lays great stress on training and workshops that ensure practical and beneficial outcomes both in terms of learning and preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Himalayas. HCHF has successfully revived dying skills such as willow basket-weaving, building of stupas, and stone-carving. In collaboration with government organisations and village communities, it is also restoring old monuments and reviving traditional cuisine, handicrafts, folklore, and traditional sports like archery and polo that have been played here for centuries.

Ladakh was declared a Union Territory (UT) in 2019. This has intensified

the expectations and aspirations of the people, along with apprehensions about their land, culture, environment, and livelihood.

A systematic approach is necessary to revive traditional skills. It starts with the revival of interest among craftsmen/women, followed by innovations and techniques to make the skills widely relevant, especially in relation to tourism. Skills like paper-making and metalcraft are in need of urgent intervention before they are completely forgotten. Economic advancement of the individual is a good way to make people realise that tradition can be a path to prosperity. The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh and Kargil, must institute skill centres and organise skill fairs. The efforts must involve local stakeholders if they are to be sustained.

At the same time, we need to explore the use of indigenous materials and techniques for current requirements, and study their role to mitigate the effects of climate change. People with specialised knowledge of both contemporary scientific conservation and traditional restoration practices can find possible sustainable solutions.

Ladakh is an example of interdependent living wherein people care for one another, their animals, and the mountains. Knowledge and skills of yore significantly strengthen the community's resilience. Ladakhi folk songs and stories inculcate social values by evoking love, compassion, and universal responsibility, which foster individual as well as social wellness. I am always worried that there is still no heritage committee or authority or guideline in Ladakh. Our cultural heritage has proved its resilience; it has been fundamental in absorbing adversity in various ways. The quest is to inspire relevant and successful adaptation.

Dr. Sonam Wangchok is the founder of the Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation, an NGO working for conservation and preservation of cultural and natural heritage in the Himalayas. He is the president of the International Association for Ladakh Studies. He is the editor of Heritage Himalaya, a biannual magazine. Recently, he was appointed the General Secretary of the Ladakh Cultural Forum.

Wangchok has many publications and academic papers to his credit. He is a member of the Academic and Research Advisory Panel, University of Ladakh. He is involved with several national and international organisations as a project consultant.

Water and Sacred Groves

Tambor Lyngdoh

I am from Mawphlang, one of the oldest villages in the state of Meghalaya in India's Northeast. Nestled in the cloud-covered Khasi hills, it is renowned for its lawkyntang — an 'untouched sacred grove'. There are smaller sacred forests in the Garo-Khasi-Jaintia range, but Mawphlang is the most celebrated.

Sacred groves are primeval forests that have survived in continuity for at least 1,000 years. They are guarded by people who live around them as abodes of their Gods. No timber, fruits, flowers, or produce are removed for sale or trade; they are only used sparingly for religious purposes. In their rich biodiversity, you can find many endangered, rare species. The groves are an ancient culture of conservation.

I was elected secretary of the Nongrum locality of Mawphlang in 1987. There were just over a 100 households. Mawphlang is blessed with natural resources, but as the population grew, we began to face a serious shortage of potable water. I remember, in my childhood we had to get up at four in the morning to go to the sacred grove to fetch water, since the village ponds dried up in the spring. But soon this was not just a seasonal problem. Well-off families began to move out to other areas. During festivals and gatherings, villagers had to fetch and store water.

Meghalaya is one of the wettest places on Earth. About 35 kilometres from Mawphlang is Mawsynram, which receives the highest rainfall in India. If you travel another 10 kilometres, you reach Cherrapunjee, the only place in India where it rains throughout the year. Meghalaya's springs are legendary for their beauty and bounty.

Ironically, in the 60s and 70s, as modern housing became popular, catchment areas were cemented over. Rainwater could not percolate into the ground. To make matters worse, the government began to beautify large springs with taps and concrete; they literally choked to death.

In 1978, village elders offered the state government some land within the Hima (kingdom of the Khasi tribe) to construct a dam. The dam would supply water to the capital city of Shillong, which was also facing a water crisis. It is pertinent to mention here that governments in Schedule VI states own minuscule amounts of lands; most of it is owned by tribal communities.

After construction started for the Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme, the Dorbar Hima (traditional government of the Hima) passed a resolution that Mawphlang would also be supplied with free drinking water. In October 1989, the first drops of water trickled through Mawphlang's public taps.

I was relieved to see the people free of the daily worry. However, the population continued to rise and a day came when even the pipe water supply was not enough anymore. I began to think about a long-term solution.

In 1995, my office started an all-out effort to revive ponds and water sources which had been abandoned. We educated villagers about the health benefits of potable water, and gave them funds to revive their ponds from silt, concrete, and other deposits. We also became more protective about the other natural resources.

In 2001, to apply for a forest conservation grant from the government, we formed a Village Forest Council (VFC). I was selected as its president. The active participation of a community is essential for any initiative to succeed. Initially we found it difficult to gain the trust of the people, especially when trying to introduce them to sustainable initiatives. It was hard to convince them to shift away from some of their ways of consuming natural resources, such as wood and charcoal for fuel and hunting animals for food. We took up the challenge to educate them on how they were stakeholders in the project.

Women's microfinance groups and farmers' groups have been formed in every village as ambassadors of conservation.


This is where you enter the sacred grove of Mawphlang, covering 76.8 hectares.

Thus began India's first REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) project — a UN-supported initiative. It was the country's first conservation project through community action. By 2004 the VFC had started conservation projects in two villages of the Hima.

We worked directly with communities throughout the Umiam lake watershed to protect community forests covering 9,250 hectares of dense forests and regenerate 5,000 hectares of open forests.

Once the work began to show results, gradually other Himas joined in.

As of today, the project has helped over 80 villages in 10 Himas enhance water capacity of their ponds and local springs. It has planted trees around the sites and declared them sacred, in keeping with the ancestral tradition. The project has hundreds of active or living drinking water sources under it's protection.

For people who had become dependent on timber for livelihood, the VFC created sub-projects related to herbal healing, medicinal gardening, beekeeping, mushroom cultivation, and vermicomposting so that they could be connected to alternative livelihoods. Simultaneously, women's microfinance groups, farmer groups, and youth groups were formed in every village as ambassadors of conservation.

This REDD+ project is one of the few in Asia that is managed by indigenous communities. It is successful because the people have recalled their heritage — their lineage and responsibility as custodians of the forests and natural resources. It is a mutual relationship; the forest depends on people for protection and the people depend on the forest for environmental services. The project areas have spread to other districts of Meghalaya, including Ri-Bhoi and Garo hills, and to Manipur state as well.

We have to balance development and preservation. Not all developmental projects, however well-intentioned, can be successful. We accept grants bearing in mind the project's long-term impact on the people and the surroundings. Palm oil plantations, hydro-electric dams and coal mining projects are among those that we have had to counter vehemently. Bearing the interest of the local communities at heart, we should fight for what is equitable and just.

Those in a position to define policy or contribute monetarily should ensure that local stakeholders not only buy into their projects but be part and parcel of the leadership teams of said policies and projects. A lot of power lies in the hands of those with influence. With great power comes great responsibility and this must be dispensed fairly.

My friend and colleague Mark Poffenberger, who is an anthropologist, has apt closing words, "The forests are a life-giving force for the Khasi people, just as they are for so many tribal communities and indigenous people worldwide. When I ask people, 'Why do we protect the forest?', they often tell me, 'Because without our forests we would cease to be a people'. Holding strong community rights to forests and water resources is essential to the wellbeing of rural, forest-dependent communities. A global study by the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) has documented that forests managed by communities throughout the world are in a better condition than those controlled by state agencies. I believe this is because forest communities value sustainable management. Most believe that their forests should be passed to their descendants in good condition, and they view their role as forest stewards, rather than owners free to sell the resource. The forest is of spiritual value, recreational value, hydrological value, medicinal value, and essential to the wellbeing of the community. This tribal perspective is often at odds with modern commercial and bureaucratic considerations regarding forests that often prioritise economic production. Tribal people like the Khasi need to emphasise their values and continue to struggle for their forest rights to protect them for future generations."

Tambor Lyngdoh has over two-and-a-half decades of experience in ecological conservation. Since 1996, he has tirelessly worked for the revival of diminishing forests and water sources in the Khasi hills, introduced ecotourism to the area, and created a local model for livelihoods security, while actively federating 10 Himas (traditional Khasi kingdoms) into an organisation — Ka Synjuk ki Hima Arliang Wah Umiam-Mawphlang Welfare Society (Synjuk). Lyngdoh is the secretary of Synjuk, which implements the Khasi Hills REDD+ Project.

He is a recipient of the 2018 Eastern Himalayan Conservation Award (Balipara Foundation), 2020 Earth Hero Award (Natwest Group), 2021 Indian Achiever's Award (Indian Achievers' Forum), 2022 Bharat Ratna Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Excellence Award (IISA and IIFS, New Delhi), and the 2022 Wetland Champions Award (Government of India).

His pursuits are in sustainable tourism, sacred grove preservation, wildlife conservation, and community development.

Of Fish, of Fowl, of Man

Salam Rajesh

When all the trees have been cut down,
when all the animals have been hunted,
when all the waters are polluted,
when all the air is unsafe to breathe,
only then will you discover you cannot eat money.

— Prophecy of the Cree Indian tribe of North America and Canada

The natural resources of the freshwater Lake Loktak were a lifeline for the communities settled within and around. It was the feeding grounds and habitat for a large variety of flora, fauna, avifauna, and migratory waterfowl. However, with the implementation of the multipurpose Loktak Hydroelectric Power Project in 1971, and subsequently, the Ithai barrage in 1983, the entire ecosystem was affected.

The lake basin was not adequately surveyed. The plan mainly relied on the data of the Survey of India conducted in the 1960s. This severely impacted its peripheral areas when the barrage was commissioned. It decreased the lake's absorption capacity, for one. It also resulted in loss of biodiversity and displacement of people — physical, economic, emotional, and spiritual.

Manipur falls within the Assam Hills province of the Northeast India Biogeographical Zone-I. It lies at the crossroads of Myanmarese, Chinese, and Indian faunal and floral ranges. The ecosystem in Manipur comprises two interrelated biomes — wetlands and forests. Towards the southern portion of the central Manipur valley lies Loktak and associated water bodies.

Spread over 289 square kilometres, Loktak is the largest freshwater lake in eastern India. It is extremely rich in biodiversity and plays an important role in the ecological and economic security of the region. The wetlands system constitutes the habitat for a vast variety of life forms, ranging from the smallest micro-plants to larger vertebrates. In 1990, it was recognised as a Ramsar site of International Importance. It is also recognised as an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International. Some species arrive here for their winter rest from as far as Europe and China.

What makes Loktak unique is its floating phumdis. From afar, phumdis look like small, circular islands. Phumdis are, in fact, floating patches of vegetation, soil, and organic matter in varying stages of decay. During monsoons, when the water level rises, the phumdis float. During the dry season, they attach to the lake's bottom and the roots gather nutrients. The indigenous fishing folk live on big phumdis, in makeshift floating huts called phumsangs. Located on the biggest phumdi, the Keibul Lamjao National Park is the only floating wildlife sanctuary in the world. There is a floating school, even a floating polling booth.

The Loktak Development Authority and Wetlands International, South Asia agree that the construction of the Ithai barrage has led to:

1. Changes in the hydrological regime of Loktak and its interrelated riverine systems, thereby affecting ecological processes and functions of the wetland;
2. Inundation of thousands of acres of agricultural and settlement lands, and displacement of local communities from flooded lands in both upstream and downstream areas;
3. Proliferation of weed and floating biomass in the lake, causing eutrophication;
4. Loss of fish population and diversity, and substantial decrease in wildlife population;
5. Decrease in the thickness of the phumdi (floating biomass) in the Keibul Lamjao National Park (KLNP), thereby threatening the survival of the endangered Sangai (Manipur brow-antlered deer).

There are two aspects to the human population. In the first place, the immediate surroundings of the lake are pockmarked by human settlements within and along its shores. The majority of the population are fishermen and farmers, who depend on the resources of the lake for their livelihood and sustenance. The fishermen belong to the scheduled castes and many of them live on islands and floating villages located within the lake.

In the second place, the uplands on its western side, where the catchment of rivers and mountain streams flowing into the lake are located, are inhabited by scheduled tribes like the Chiru, Aimol, Rongmei, Kom, and Chothe. They depend on shifting cultivation for their food and sustenance.

One of the reasons for the degradation of the lake ecosystem is the silt deposited by its western catchment. This is caused by slash-and-burn farming, deforestation due to timber logging, and random wildfires lit for hunting. Many of the mountain streams flowing down to the lake carry a huge silt load and this makes the lake bed shallower.

So, the Manipur Nature Society and the Rongmei tribe of Tokpa Kabui village, located on the eastern face of the Thangjing-Loiching range — that forms an important catchment of the lake — worked on around 500 hectares of forest land belonging to the village community.

Phumdis on Loktak Lake are floating patches of vegetation, soil, and organic matter in varying stages of decay. Fisherfolk live on the large phumdis.

About 80 volunteers comprising both Rongmei boys and girls from the Tokpa Kabui village, came together to form the Tokpa Nature Club. Much of the community-based management of their forestlands was carried out by these volunteers.

The emphasis was on the regeneration of the community forestlands, checking the loss of topsoil, healthy growth of vegetation cover, and inducing the return of wildlife to the area. Vegetative check dams were constructed at low scale along the course of the mountain streams to form water bodies. The water bodies so created helped slow down the process of silt deposition downhill. About 80 volunteers comprising both Rongmei boys and girls from the village, came together to form the Tokpa Nature Club. Much of the community-based management of their forestlands was carried out by these volunteers.

While the park itself is predominantly state-owned, the remaining areas are divided between the tribal groups of the Thang, Brel, and Maril tribes. There is evidence to show that through human history, humans and wildlife have coexisted here, their lives interlinked. Yet, the official establishment of the park in 1977 has isolated the people from their land. Laws governing the park have turned the centuries-old practice of subsistence fishing and extraction of natural resources into a crime.

Though cornered, the Sangai Protection Forum of the tribes is working on protection and conservation of the endangered Sangai (brow-antlered deer) and other wildlife, addressing issues like poaching and rescue of stranded animals during floods.

There are community-led initiatives in the tribal villages of Kha-Aimol, Khoushabung, Thangjing, and Chiru. Their objective is to restore the watershed ecosystem, which is important for the rejuvenation of the catchments.

Many tribal communities have shifted to alternative kinds of farming; their traditional farming methods didn't harm the Loktak till the lopsided development project was undertaken. Now they are looking at organic farming in select pockets that do not disturb the forests. They are also encouraging mithun (*Bos frontalis*) rearing, which is highly feasible as it is a semi-domesticated bovine, and requires that forestlands be conserved for its food and shelter.

Indigenous people's role in conservation is deep. Worldwide, since they have always 'resisted development', their natural habitats, often the most biodiverse regions, have been largely untouched. While that puts them in the frontline of the very tough and dangerous fight, they now understand that they can raise their voice against threats, and there is a strong global community that will listen, unlike in the past.

We all have to fight together, not just tribes. However, the indigenous approach to conservation which has at its heart personification of Nature is perhaps emerging strongest.

Based in Imphal, Manipur (India), Salam Rajesh works with indigenous people and local communities for the protection and conservation of water bodies and community-managed forests.

He has been working with the fishing community at Lake Loktak and Lake Pumlen to address issues pertaining to conservation, livelihood and wildlife.

Rajesh is a member of the State Wildlife Board, State Wetlands Authority, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the Commission on Environmental, Economic and Policy, and honorary member of the Indigenous and Community Conserved Area Consortium.

Water Whisperers Sustain the Springs

Neha Bhave and Dr. Himanshu Kulkarni

As conversations around environmental issues such as climate change gain momentum, tribal communities that dwell closest to Mother Nature become the most vulnerable to natural forces on one side, and a plethora of anthropogenic factors related to the accelerated growth of the modern world on the other.

Many indigenous societies end up sacrificing their lives and livelihood for a crisis they are least responsible for. The environment and the ecosystem mean much more to tribal communities because not only do they live within the limits of Nature's resources, they virtually live with Nature, adapting their lives to the vagaries of many natural phenomena.

Age-old systems of groundwater sourcing, access and distribution still exist across many regions of the world. They represent the long-standing tradition and culture of using groundwater for life and livelihood. Stepwells, springwells, qanats, karezs and various adaptations of Persian wheel-based groundwater extraction mechanisms (rahats, mhots and chadas) represent a global history spanning at least a few hundred years, and possibly a longer history of excavated wells that goes back over 10,000 years.

Much of this glorious engineering of stunning stepwells, indigenous infiltration galleries, and extraction mechanisms like the rahat, is a consequence of the 'settling down' of humans for growing food and raising farm animals. This is also a consequence of their ability to access water through flowing streams and rivers. The local sourcing of groundwater is an integral part of this history. However, we must remember that this was preceded by human beings roaming the earth as hunter-gatherers for a very long period; their nomadic lifestyles must have demanded the search for water.

The pre-settlement history of humans provides us an insight into the importance of groundwater in the form of springs. Even today, adivasis retain the legacy of this 'longer' history of human civilisation, which includes a unique connection to one of the 'greenest' sources of groundwater — the spring.

Springs are the locations on the surface of the Earth where underground water emerges — springs out — and then flows downslope through small brooks, streams and rivers. Technically, springs represent the natural discharge of groundwater from aquifers onto the ground.

Most tribal communities, through various traditions, have survived and prospered through the use of springwater. Subsequently, they accessed water from shallow dugwells in some regions, but groundwater in the form of springs still remains their lifeline. As a matter of fact, their cultures have developed around natural resources and these cultures have ingrained unique ways of respecting, protecting and conserving water resources.

Whether it is the sustainability of sources, the distribution of water for all, or protecting catchments that hold natural recharge zones, the water management practices of indigenous communities illustrate many examples of managing and governing groundwater resources equitably, efficiently and sustainably. Despite being dependent on forest produce, the communities have, in many instances, illustrated ways of coexistence with natural habitats without invasive modes of extraction and exploitation.

Preservation of forests ensures protection of the catchment areas of springs and therefore of the water they provide. To access water from remote springs, in many places locally available products like bamboo are used to carry water home.

The exogenous pressures of rapid development, often at the expense of natural resources, are obvious in many regions where ethnic communities of India live. During our journeys, we observed that different tribal communities practise water resources management differently, far more sustainable than what we in mainstream India do. To understand these approaches, we present here a few examples.

Springwater remains a vital priority for indigenous peoples, particularly for potable and domestic purposes. In fact, the communities divert base flows of small streams (the groundwater discharge component of the stream or river flow) for vegetable farming (e.g., the Bastar region) — an illustration of how equitable, efficient management of groundwater leads to a sustainable view of water resources.

The Bhuinya and Juang tribes of Odisha have their own ways. In the Kendujhar district, the Juangs worship springs, particularly the highest point of groundwater discharge in a catchment. We have observed this practice in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand too. The Juangs have been worshipping the source (often the only source at hand) by building a place of worship where the water emerges. The purpose is two-fold. One, being a holy place, the water does not get abused in any way. The symbolic worship of rocks at the spring also indicates their reverence of the underground system (aquifers) that form the source for springs. In fact, some of these springs are places of worship for both tribals and non-tribals — the Juangs along with other Hindu denominations worship the same spring in different ways.

Photo 1: An indigenous system designed by tribal communities for accessing base flow from a stream for irrigating crops (Bastar, Chhattisgarh)

Photo 3: A place of worship at a spring. The Juangs and other Hindus worship at this common temple. Worship of springs is observed across India across various cultures — both ancient and modern.

Photo 2: The catchment areas of the Baitarani river in Kendujhar district are characterised by several springs that emerge in Odisha's tribal hinterlands.

Photo 4: Springs in the remote, thickly vegetated region of the Nilgiris are primary sources of drinking water for tribal communities.

The Nilgiri hills of Tamil Nadu show a contestation over water resources. Indigenous communities like the Badaga and Kurumba have been dependent on springwater for several generations. They believe that flowing water from a spring is cleaner and safer than stagnant water or water drawn out of hand pumps. Lately, however, their water security has been jeopardised. The replacement of native crops with tea, teak and eucalyptus plantations, and the proliferation of resorts have significantly affected the catchment areas which recharge aquifers that discharge into traditional springs. Digging of wells and drilling borewells have led to competition over aquifers. As local springs dry up, indigenous communities in the remote Nilgiris must walk long distances across an undulating terrain, often thickly forested, to fetch water from distant springs; those too are showing signs of depletion.

Dependence on springwater is a common bond that unites water management practices of indigenous communities in the north, south,

east, and west. Local institutions and organisations have played a pivotal role in our engagement with tribal communities across the country. With support from the organisations and knowledge vested in the communities, the Springs Initiative has worked on the mapping and revival of close to 10,000 springs across India.

The legacy of spring-water management practices by different ethnic societies can inform modern-day practices on groundwater governance in particular and water policy in general, especially when the depletion and contamination of water resources have become an ever-growing problem. The ecosystem and the culture of some of the most pristine regions lie with the tribals. We must reimagine and recreate their role to restore the ecosystem.

Neha Bhave has been working with the Advanced Center for Water Resources Development and Management (ACWADAM) as a researcher for the last six years, on a wide range of thematics like drinking water security, agriculture and livelihoods, groundwater dependent ecosystems, springshed management and participatory groundwater management. Her work focuses on field data collection and the associated collation, analysis, and interpretation. She also conducts technical sessions for ACWADAM's foundation course training. As part of field engagements, Neha has been able to reach out to nearly 15 partner organisations and institutions across 11 states and has trained more than 250 fellows in groundwater management.

Dr. Himanshu Kulkarni leads ACWADAM, a not-for-profit knowledge institution and think tank working on groundwater since 1998. He is a hydrogeologist by qualification and has been working on aquifers and groundwater across India's diverse groundwater typology for more than 35 years. ACWADAM has partnered with a variety of organisations on piloting and mainstreaming the ideas of participatory groundwater management and springshed development across India, Nepal, Bhutan, Vietnam, and has begun work in Africa. ACWADAM's work under Kulkarni has followed the principle of bringing communities closer to their aquifers and managing groundwater as a common pool resource through the process of Aquifer-based Participatory Groundwater Management.

Tiger and I

Leeladhar Tokala

My brother is Tiger. Yes, the roaring kind. The one that is accorded the status of national animal of India. The one that faced danger of extinction till a few years ago.

I am Leeladhar Tokala, and I belong to the Deva Chenchu community. Our home is the pristine jungles of Nallamala in the Eastern Ghats range. These hills run through seven districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Nature here is untouched and profoundly beautiful. The hills have lofty ridges, deep gorges, cavernous valleys, and perpetual rivers. Before Telangana tore away from the state of Andhra Pradesh, a large part of Nallamala formed the Nagarjunasagar-Srisailam Tiger Reserve, the country's largest. Following the separation, the reserve area on our side in Telangana has been named the Amrabad Tiger Reserve; it is still India's second-largest tiger reserve.

I studied biology and zoology and went to work in the city. After a few years, I began to feel lost. The call of the wild was strong. So, I returned to work as a nature guide and conservationist.

I have two siblings, a younger brother and a sister. However, for us Chenchus, the entire tribe is a family. I was born and raised in the forest. As a child I was encouraged to learn from the animals and birds, the streams, and the land itself. We were allowed to wander without our elders worrying. This helped us form deep connections with the forest and understand it like no book could ever teach us. I also accompanied my grandfather and father deep into the woods. They explained to me the benefits of the herbs we collected. They taught me to respect the learnings of our forefathers that guide us to find food, build shelter, and treat our people and cattle in sickness. These are lived lessons of sustainable coexistence. That's why we consider tigers kin.

When I was young, a bear attacked my grandfather. He came back home dripping blood. I was furious. I picked up an axe and asked my grandfather to point me in the direction of the bear. My grandfather was in great pain. But he smiled and said, 'There is a border for everything in this universe. If you cross that line, you pay for it. The bear lost its way and we ran into each other. You want to punish someone who was lost and probably scared?'

My father has followed in grandfather's footsteps. He has tirelessly worked for the wellbeing of our people and the forest. I carry their legacy.

Things are changing. The government officials, led by the Forest Department, say that we are responsible for the destruction of the forest, and we must move out. The thought of my people being forced out of our ancestral home anguishes me. In similar attempts, some tribes have been forcibly displaced, and I have seen their sufferings. It is well-nigh impossible for forest dwellers to find a sense of home anywhere else, or live among mainstream populations. Our food, language, livelihoods, life, everything is tethered to the woods. Evicting us is akin to taking fish out of water; we won't survive.

The Forest Rights Act of 2006 recognises our symbiotic relationship with the forests, our traditional wisdom regarding its conservation. Despite that, big projects continue to pose a threat. For instance, when tourism was introduced in the Amrabad Tiger Reserve, and we accepted the role of forest guides, we were promised that the project would not involve motor vehicles or axing of trees to widen the roads. The guidelines were flouted. We had to take it up with the district administration to finally put a stop to it. We will not give up our forest. We have safeguarded it for ages, and it is our duty to continue to do so.

The second worry is about the fate of our tribe. We get everything from the jungle. As a child, I never ate rice. We have an abundant supply of millets, tuberous roots, fruits and berries. Some of these are exclusive to this area. Now, as the government distributes free rice and other foods under its schemes, our people are suffering from malnourishment. The nutritional balance in our food intake has been disturbed. Our women are facing pregnancy-related complications. The children are born malnourished. To counter these ill-effects, we are actioning a plan to

grow more traditional millets and tuberous crops. We will distribute them to the government anganwadis (rural childcare centres) so that they can be provided to children, and pregnant and lactating women.

Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic pushes us in that direction more than any other influence in recent times. As the virus spread like wildfire, we became cautious. Forest-dwellers are miles away from medical facilities. The fact that we will not receive immediate treatment made us reconsider our exposure to the outside world. With the help of the administration, we ensured that no outsiders come into our villages, and none of us travel out, except a few designated people who had to bring in critical supplies. By cutting down our dependence on external resources, we have, in a way, started living the way our ancestors did.

We are part of this great ecosystem. There is no proof that we are a threat to it. How can we be evicted in the name of conservation while the government explores uranium mining in these very forests? Even if we are monetarily compensated and rehabilitated outside, our relationship with money is so weak that we will be ruined before we know it.

Allow us to live where we are, where we have always been. Just like the Tiger, who is our brother.

Leeladhar Tokala
Conservationist.
Samvaad Fellow - 2021.
Deva Chenchu Tribe,
Nagarkurnool, Telangana.


From the **Gut**

The Lost Art of Seasoning

Abo Arangham

There must be something strangely sacred in salt. It is in our tears and in the sea.

— Sand and Foam, by Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931)

Growing up in Khonsa, a hill station in the Patkai hills of Arunachal Pradesh, like many of my peers I attended an English-medium school, and then went to Delhi for higher studies. I left, but the stories didn't leave me. These were stories I avidly heard as a child — of great Wancho warriors and headhunters, animals and birds, gods and Creation, and fragments about everyday nothings. I didn't know then that one day I too would have a heroic story to tell.

While pursuing my Master's degree at the Asian Academy of Film and Television in Noida, one day I received a call from my childhood friend Pongro Wangsu. He said he wanted my help to document the sacred salt wells in his village, Chasa. He wanted to use the film project to revive his people's interest in the ancient tradition of salt-making that they had abandoned a few decades ago. I felt an instant connection to the story. I said yes. Thus, the Lost Art of Seasoning — my first major film — was born.

First, we went to the community elders. Without their help, we would not be able to access the thick, near-virgin rainforest; the wells were buried in its growth. They sent us to Pongro's uncle Mankai Wangsu, and his peers Ranjam Wangpan and Wangnyak Loham. They were the last remaining salt makers.

We had hired people to help us thin the vegetation and make way, but we were entirely dependent on the three old men to remember the exact location of at least one well. Once we found it, they would perform rituals to invoke the salt goddess, build an oven from scratch, build a channel for the saltwater in the wells to reach the oven, and then harvest salt. We would film the entire process.

There were many other obstacles. Some villagers said if the saltmakers were unable to recall the rituals, the wrath of the salt goddess would be upon everyone. Others thought we wanted to sell the salt. Then we were told where the nearest well was. It sat across three thickly-forested hills. We would have to go back and forth on foot every day, trudging sopping-wet undergrowth and slippery slopes, avoiding wild animals. As if that was not enough, by the time we started shooting, the monsoons were upon us — unrelenting rains.

Looking back, the entire project feels insane. We shot the film in bits, during my holidays. Sometimes, I took special permission to extend my leave. I also had to complete my course assignments. The whole project

took us two years because all members of the unit lived in different places at the time, including the editor who was a student in another film school.

The salt that emerged from the chaos of our search felt other-worldly. We had trudged a path our forefathers walked. We touched a sacred part of their lives. Ever since, the community has been harvesting salt intermittently. A lost piece of history is coming back to life.

Wangnyak Loham, one of the last remaining salt makers of Chasa.

From Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh, Abo Arangham is a journalist and a filmmaker, with a specialisation in cinematography. Abo has directed, shot, and edited several award-winning short films. The Lost Art of Seasoning is his first major project.

Looking to the Indigenous Platter

Dr. Suparna Ghosh-Jerath

My journey into the amazing world of indigenous foods and food systems started almost a decade ago. At that time, I was involved in a research project to understand the impact of different government nutrition programmes on prevalent malnutrition in the tribal communities of Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand.

While assessing diets of the women and the children to understand their nutritional intake, I came across several local foods which the community was aware of — foods they grew and/or collected from fields, forests, and water sources. I could sense their excitement and feeling of ownership when they shared what they knew about these foods. I was keen to explore the nutritive value of some of these, but required their scientific names to do so; I found the task challenging.

Even though knowledge about the foods existed, only a few were consumed by the communities as part of their daily diets. The present diets of women and children lacked diversity and were nutritionally inadequate.

I wondered if there was a way to systematically document the indigenous wisdom about natural food sources, to check the nutritive value and safety of these foods, and to find out why there was suboptimal consumption of these foods.

The wisdom is grounded in the historical legacy and spirituality of the people, who are reservoirs of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) about cultivated and wild foods derived from plants, animals, and fungi species. We recognised that this rich TEK — if substantiated with scientific evidence on palatability, safety, and nutritive value — could become a sustainable strategy to reshape the food environment of tribal communities and potentially address the widespread malnutrition and specific nutritional deficiencies.

It is worth mentioning here that the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations is coordinating such an effort to compile the nutritive value of indigenous foods from seven socio-economic regions across the globe; the state of Meghalaya in northeast India, where over 86 percent of the population is indigenous, is one of them.

We further recognised that the inextricable link of indigenous people with their sustainably-managed environment has the potential to effectively produce and collect/procure foods that are better adapted to local soil conditions; more resistant to drought, altitude, flooding, and extreme climates, are less resource intensive, have a low-carbon footprint; and are produced in environment-sensitive conditions. There is documented evidence that many of the indigenous foods accessed in various parts of the world are nutrient rich and may have the potential to alleviate hunger and malnutrition. This led to my next project — an exploration of low-cost, local, food-based solutions, which are embedded in the cultural milieu of indigenous communities.

We decided to work with the populous tribal groups of Jharkhand that included the Santal, Oraon, Munda, Ho, and Sauria Paharia (a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) peoples residing in the districts of Godda, Gumla, Khunti, and West Singhbhum. We started learning and co-producing knowledge in partnership with these communities, who, like other indigenous populations, are custodians of ancient and unique food systems. Most of them live in forest areas and use natural food sources as nutrition and medicine.

We found that these communities had TEK on 108 to 194 varieties of cereals, pulses, vegetables, roots and tubers, flesh foods, insects, and mushrooms, accessed from diverse food environments — cultivated lands, forests, pastures, roadsides, wastelands, and waterbodies. They also had access to both formal markets (fair-price shops under the Public Distribution System of the Ministry of Food and Civil Supplies) and informal markets (weekly haat-bazaars, village corner shops, and mobile food vendors).

Indigenous foods comprise almost 60 percent to 65 percent of the total foods reported by these communities. After due taxonomic classification and nutrient analysis, we found several of these to be rich sources of micronutrients like iron, calcium, zinc, vitamin A, vitamin C, and folic acid. However, upon assessment of the people's dietary intake, we found a prevalence of chronic energy deficiency and undernutrition in women and children. The biodiverse food resources available to the communities were not resulting in their nutritional wellbeing, even though they were prominent foods in their culture not too long ago.

We tried to explore the barriers to their consumption and came upon a multitude of factors. There is a high opportunity cost involved in accessing natural resources, owing to declining diversity in traditional crop species grown in farms, diminished availability of wild foods in forests and water bodies, easy access to market foods which are perceived as items of high nutritional value, and limited diversity in the foods distributed in ration shops, which are part of the government's Public Distribution System (PDS) to deliver food security.

On the other hand, we also identified favourable factors of indigenous foods, such as taste, satiety, perceived nutritional benefits,

A discussion with the community regarding the nutritional benefits of indigenous foods.

climate-resilient properties (for certain crops), along with cultural and religious attributes.

Thus, we concluded that several indigenous foods identified have huge potential in providing sustainable solutions that can bolster efforts for amelioration of poverty, hunger, and various forms of malnutrition in tribal communities.

The food literacy acquired from a TEK — including agro-ecological knowledge (where and what type of food is produced), cultivation and production knowledge (how food is produced), and processing and consumption knowledge (how food is prepared and distributed) — is derived informally, from everyday practices in home and community. This literacy needs to be consciously promoted to create an enabling environment to revive indigenous food systems.

Domestic cultivation of indigenous crop and plant varieties among small farmers can be another useful strategy. Collection, preservation, and use of indigenous seed varieties in agriculture, must be encouraged. Indigenous seed banks could be set up by governments and NGOs for promotion and commercialisation of local varieties of seeds. This is critical to preserve the traditional gene pool of indigenous crops. Homestead production of indigenous varieties of fruits and vegetables in kitchen/backyard gardens can also be an effective strategy for fostering their production and consumption at the household level. Local agricultural extension centres can effectively promote both farming and homestead gardening of nutrient-rich indigenous crops, leafy and other vegetables, roots, tubers, and fruits.

Recently, the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development has released the School Nutrition Gardens Policy. It says, kitchen gardens can be set up around anganwadis (rural childcare centres) and primary schools to encourage children to grow and eat local, indigenous foods. Initiatives like the National Horticulture Mission[1] and the Poshan Atlas[2] make special efforts to diversify existing food systems by promoting access to locally-sourced wild foods, and incentivising local farmers to grow indigenous crops of high nutritional value.

In addition, behaviour change strategies to create a case for including indigenous foods in local diets need to be part of the ongoing community-based nutrition programmes. The awareness sessions could focus on tribal women and children, who are the most nutritionally vulnerable sections of the community.

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References

1. The Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH) is a Centrally Sponsored Scheme for the holistic growth of the horticulture sector covering fruits, vegetables, root and tuber crops, mushrooms, spices, flowers, aromatic plants, coconut, cashew, cocoa and bamboo.
2. Poshan Abhiyaan is a holistic nutritional programme to bring down stunting in children (0-6 years), reduce anaemia among women and adolescent girls (15-49 years), and improve birth weight. The programme is run by the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development. The Poshan Atlas, a part of Poshan Abhiyaan, is a user-friendly web portal which maps India's crop diversity across all districts — for both current and historical crops. It provides agro ecological guidance, encourages dietary diversity and nutrition, and promotes the consumption of traditional and locally available nutrient-rich foods.

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Reclaiming Space for Folk Healthcare

Professor G. Hariramamurthi

India's healthcare fraternity continues to argue for and against policy recognition, science-based evidence, and validation for orally-transmitted tribal or folk-healing traditions. Healers continue to seek recognition so as to not suffer being unfairly labelled as illegal practitioners or quacks. Both the institutionally trained professionals of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Homoeopathy), as well as those of allopathy, have gone beyond the call of duty to attend to our vast population when it was battling the pandemic. However, the powers-that-be are hesitant about the recognition of indigenous and traditional healers, perhaps because these rural women and men don't have formal medical training.

Justice and justification aside, we need these women and men as part of the solution in the light of frequently occurring epidemics. We need a paradigm shift in the current public health system policy.

We excessively depend on one dominant medical culture, which is good but costly. This is especially relevant because common citizens are increasingly favouring a pluralistic health culture. Why else do thousands of people visit Puttur, a small place in Andhra Pradesh every year, to treat their broken bones? Because it is affordable, accessible, effective and safe. This is but one of the thousands of cases in point that tribal and folk health knowledge, skills, human resources, and natural resources are available in all 6,00,000 villages of India, at a much lesser cost.

Doctors almost always prefer to only work in urban areas, where hospitals are present. Healers rarely live in towns and cities because they do not have access to natural resources. The rural population is 68.84 percent of our total population. The urban population constitutes only 31.16 percent. India has a doctor-population ratio of 1:1,456, whereas the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends 1:1000. For every four doctors who work in urban areas we only have one in rural areas. In this gap, you can see the immense role healers play.

A comparison between Himachal Pradesh and Delhi would reveal this easily. 90 percent of the people of Himachal Pradesh, who live in rural areas, have access to 705 hospitals and 5,665 beds. The remaining 10 percent, who live in urban areas have access to 96 hospitals, 6,734 beds, and seven medical college hospitals. The situation appears extremely lopsided and untenable, till you understand that the rural population has survived this anomaly because it has access to an estimated invisible force of 30,000 tribal and non-tribal healers, who are entirely supported by the community, with no financial incidence on the state exchequer. More importantly, the healers know and use around 643 medicinal plant species that occur in the state.

When these numbers are compared with that of Delhi, you will be taken aback. Delhi has the highest proportion of urban population, at 97.5 percent. It has 1,298 dispensaries, 1,160 nursing homes, 230 maternity homes, 178 polyclinics or special clinics, 88 hospitals, and 17 medical college hospitals. The Health Department in Delhi says that they have three doctors for every 1,000 citizens — more than prescribed WHO ratio. But in terms of availability of hospital beds, Delhi has 2.7 beds per 1,000 citizens which is slightly short of 3:1,000 as per the WHO standards.

While Delhi has a population of 1.9 crore, only a tiny part of it lives in its 165 villages. They fortunately have around 250 traditional healers, including paramparik vaidyas, hakims, and gunis, who have migrated from the adjacent states of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and have access to 604 medicinal plant species; 135 of them are reportedly used in the Unani system of medicine.

Universal healthcare coverage does not seem realisable unless we consider our strengths to address this weakness, unless we make use of the opportunities of traditional knowledge. We can do so by integrating and mainstreaming the traditional community healthcare practices under the aegis of the Union Ministry of AYUSH. Only if the Centre recommends and supports this policy shift will the states implement this integration. The budgetary allocation for this purpose at present is too minimal.

The ministry has to support the states in identifying healers to assess their prior knowledge and certify them as per the guidelines of the Quality Council of India under a third party. There should also be a competency based and voluntary certification scheme. This is a pioneering world model as per ISO Standard 17024. Furthermore, training them under the National Health Mission will strengthen their existing knowledge and skills with inputs from Ayurveda, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa and Unani at a minimal cost. Simultaneously, we can continue to increase budgetary allocation to enhance access to doctors, hospitals, and beds in rural India.

Coming to the question of evidence on traditional medicine — validation for what, why, how, by whom, and at what cost. It is practical to revalidate the rich treasure of knowledge and skills of non-codified community healthcare practices. It will be a quick and easy exercise with a political will. At the same time, it is also important to selectively

begin revalidating our traditional knowledge using a long, costly, and time-consuming method of Western biomedical perspective by way of pre-clinical and clinical research methods to generate evidence on a few priority areas, such as anaemia, diarrhoea, and malaria. In the University of Trans-Disciplinary Health Sciences and Technology, we have demonstrated the feasibility of this, albeit on a small scale.

It is sufficient to generate evidence based on a large number of community-specific and ecosystem-specific medicinal plants to meet primary healthcare needs. This single strategic step alone would enable our communities to access primary healthcare safely and effectively. Of course, growing private investments can make AYUSH accessible to the rich and well-to-do. For enhancing the quality of life of indigenous and rural populations, there is no way other than this immediate and practical step.

Our 7,00,000 Ayurveda doctors, and 10,00,000 folk healers have been using 6,500 medicinal plant species in their practice. Of these, around 2,500 species are already documented and used in the Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani (ASU) systems of medicine. Folk healers also know about another 4,000 species that ASU doctors do not. It will not be possible to rediscover this living archive if we allow it to perish — it will be a civilisational loss.

The pluralistic health culture of both non-codified and codified systems have been India's health and wealth. We just have to apply the ASU principles and practices of pharmacology to folk knowledge and skills so that they can provide a sound framework for revalidation. This will also strengthen the communities' own tier of health knowledge.

Most folk healers believe in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — the world is one family. They practise it. They believe in feeding and serving the sick, the poor and the needy, because it is a call of duty. They have been doing so for generations. They do not convert anybody's hunger and illness into an opportunity. Since this principle does not align with the modern market economy, they have become poorer. Their younger generations, also caught in the poverty cycle, have to be motivated to learn from elders, take up research, and publish and promote the associated pharmacology.

We understand the politics of knowledge between the Western and Eastern knowledge systems, between traditional knowledge and modern scientific knowledge. There is no need to stage or win a war on this count. We have enough and more doctors of Western medicine. We, in fact, supply doctors of Western medicine to the world. There must be a constructive and continued dialogue between the Eastern and Western treatises.

If the Western scientists are concerned about the safety and efficacy of tribal and traditional remedies, we can encourage them to invest in taking up the validation of our knowledge.

If they want to learn and use it, let us train them in our folk traditions. At the same time, do we not have the responsibility to invest in educating and promoting our own folk knowledge that has given birth to Ayurveda, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa, and Unani. It has sustained itself for centuries with little or no state support, but it may not survive, by itself, the unprecedented assault of the modern economy in another 15-20 years.

Let us not forget that modern science discovered the medicine for malaria — quinine or Artemisinin — from tribal knowledge. No less than 200 modern medicines have been discovered from folk leads. More will get added as antimicrobial resistance increases.

Despite lack of clinical evidence about a grandmothers' recipe like pepper and turmeric infusion in hot milk, for cold and cough, don't we see it as an immunity-boosting recipe on the AYUSH website? Isn't buttermilk a home remedy for loose motions? Aren't jaggery-peanut balls a guard against anaemia? The anganwadis (government healthcare centres for children) promote them. Ayurveda and Siddha support these recipes based on their pharmacological principles. Their epistemological understanding of taste, quality, potency, post-digestive effect, and action can definitely enhance the knowledge of biomedical experts. Instead, we continue to promote biomedical solutions that remain to be clinically proven beyond doubt. What is the nature of evidence or validation for using vaccines under emergency approval? Are we not promoting them in relation to the pandemic? Let us ask ourselves, have we spent even 1 percent of the vaccine budget on Kabasura Kudineer (KSK), a poly-herbal Siddha medicine that reduced SARS-CoV-2 viral load in asymptomatic COVID-19 individuals as compared to vitamin C and zinc supplementation (as found by a prospective, exploratory, open-labelled, comparative, randomised, controlled trial in Tamil Nadu)?

There is a lack of faith, confidence and respect in our own knowledge and skills. I am not against allopathy. But I am for allopathy as much as Ayurveda or Siddha or Unani or Sowa Rigpa or folk medicine. Clinical research of modern medicine is already being reimagined. We need to similarly reimagine the relevance of folk medicine and AYUSH.

If we can train people, who have no prior knowledge, in 21 days in allopathic medicine and use them as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers to enhance universal health coverage, why are we not using folk healers who have been using and practising medicine in thousands of years of unbroken tradition?

India's 7,00,000 Ayurveda doctors and 10,00,000 folk healers have been using 6,500 medicinal plant species in their practice.

Dr. G. Hariramamurthi is an Emeritus Professor and heads the Centre for Local Health Traditions and Policy at the University of Trans-Disciplinary Health Sciences and Technology, Bengaluru, Karnataka. After a decade and more of a corporate career in HMT (International) Limited, he has spent two decades in developmental areas of sustainable agriculture, health, and livelihoods at the Prarambha, Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions. He is currently pursuing an academic stint at the TDU for a decade.

Dr. G. Hariramamurthi has facilitated Certification of Prior Learning for healers from Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Odisha, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. He has been instrumental in the establishment and operation of a national network of traditional community health practitioners associations across 15 states. He has built capacity for trainers of the North Eastern Institute of Ayurveda Folk Medicine, Union Ministry of AYUSH, in documentation and assessment of local health traditions. He has spearheaded the livelihoods programme on medicinal plants through establishment and operationalisation of 14 community-owned enterprises, and more than 2,00,000 home herbal gardens for primary healthcare across 7 states.

Seeds of Our Roots

Satluj Armo Bhalavi

My home is the village of Nevargaon, in Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh. Balaghat lies in the south-eastern part of the state and shares its boundaries with Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra. As borders go, they are unevenly permeable; word travels, realities intertwine. About 25 percent of the people in this region are indigenous.

I am a Gond — the second largest tribal group in India. Our arts, cultural expressions, folk lore, and customs reflect a historically powerful relationship with Nature. Our economy is agricultural, so we live in oneness with natural seasons. We are six siblings — five sisters and a brother. My beloved parents, Mahi Armo and Padam Singh Armo, passed away a few years ago. I married last year; my husband works in the district court and I am a Gram Sevak (village-level social worker).

Over four-five decades, with the slow but steady incursion of the capital market, we have lost our old ways. The traditional knowledge systems have become weak. The self-governance structures have all but collapsed. We are in an existential crisis.

Our ancestors made a living farming and hunting. In the early 1970s, hunting was banned in India. We didn't hunt for commercial or recreational purposes; ours was subsistence hunting in keeping with the rhythms of breeding and biodiversity. With that option taken away, we were left dependent on agriculture and daily-wage labour.

Our farming was largely traditional. We grew local crops using our own seeds that we saved from previous harvests. How to preserve seeds, sow, farm, irrigate, harvest — these are very detailed practices passed down from one generation to the next. We never bought inputs from any market or company, and certainly did not use insecticides, pesticides, or chemicals. We used natural ways of protecting crops, accepting that some part of it will go to bugs, birds, bees, and butterflies, who are pollinators. As the market economy pushed alien hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides, the nature of farming changed.

In a rush to grow more and grow faster, we adapted, even though it meant we were not growing old foodgrains anymore or using time-tested techniques. By the 1980s and 90s, our farmers had become completely dependent on new inputs, whose prices had begun to sharply rise. That apart, hybrid seeds required more water than conventional crops, and because of their low resistance to diseases they needed more fertilisers and pesticides. The speciality of traditional farming is that the seeds for the following year's sowing are prepared from the best-quality crop of the current year. Even if the crop fails the seeds will provide the next crop. In the case of hybrid crops, seed saving didn't work; farmers had to buy stocks every sowing season.

In market-led agriculture, farmers have to pay upfront for every input — seeds, electricity, equipment, fertilisers, pesticides, and wages. From the time of sowing the crop, to finally receiving the money from the sale, it takes four to six months. Small farmers do not have much working capital. As a result, almost every farmer was in debt of either the sellers of inputs or moneylenders. Imagine their situation when a crop fails! We already know about Maharashtra where every year hundreds of farmers are driven to suicide by debt burdens.

The entire switch to so-called modern farming reduced the role our women played in maintaining food security; they were once decision-makers and keepers of farmlands and kitchen gardens, and seeds. However, in the mainstream mechanics, selling and buying are conducted in almost all-male markets; when you are not where the key decisions are taken, you become the bearers of drudgery. Like in other parts of India, our women too became saddled with up to 70 percent labour on the farms.

It took us a long time to see that we were nearing the brink. Once we realised it, we could not possibly sit back.

A community mobilisation meeting.

There are two types of land in our region. We call the highlands barrara. The low-lying areas are jheela. We were cultivating paddy on jheela lands, but the produce was not enough. So, we started exploring the possibility of farming on barraras. There was a time when we used to till the barraras, but we live by the Kanha National Park. Wild animals, especially boars, used to destroy the crops. So, slowly we stopped using the lands, and lantana took over. Lantana is an aggressive species of weed — a family of nearly 150 types of perennially flowering plants. Its leaves are poisonous, so animals can't graze on them. But its flowers are brightly coloured, and its fruits are sweet when ripe. So, birds spread the seeds far and wide, and they grow like infestation, resistant to cutting and even burning.

To marshal resources, a team of like-minded people came forward. We persistently engaged with individual households as well as village bodies to raise awareness and foster mobilisation. We brought the entire community together to get rid of lantana and reclaim the barraras. Lantana eradication became a community participation project.

We also received the support of organisations like Foundation for Ecological Society (FES) and Krishak. FES tied up with the Gram Sabhas — a general assembly of all eligible voters in a village — to provide technical knowhow and resources. The organisations funded 25 percent of the total costs. The community pitched in with the balance 75 percent and labour. In seven-eight years, we reclaimed more than 1,500 hectares of land.

Simultaneously, we motivated the farmers to revert to traditional farming techniques and indigenous seeds. We advised them to restart cultivating old-world grains and millets like kodo, kutki, madia, red paddy, and gurmatia paddy. In fact, I started this initiative with my family.

When the farmers were sure that they would not have to buy seeds every year, nor would the crops need as much water, fertilisers, or pesticides, some of them agreed. Others were interested but hesitant to switch. So, they came to observe and learn from the converted farmers. Once they saw the results, there was no looking back.

With the lantana gone, our forests are healthier. Minor first produce collection has gone up. Women are more involved in farming decisions.

In fact, they are the ones who really took a stand and supported reintroduction of traditional crops. Today, we are working with over 4,500 families in 36 villages. They routinely exchange seeds, knowhow, and organic techniques. Seed exchanges have created a well-stocked seed bank. In fact, in diets of city people, old food grains have made a comeback; they pay a premium for traditional millets and seeds. We finally know our seeds are safe with our women, which is how it was.

Satluj Armo Bhalavi
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Our Honeybee Network

Rajat Raghatwan

It has been over four years since I established Universal Tribes, a portal on which indigenous handicrafts and forest produce find a market. When we started, we launched brands for individual products and made them available across 50 online platforms.

Once we created demand, we were able to sell the products directly to consumers so that every artisan and farmer could earn a fair price, which they often don't get because they do not have reliable linkages with the markets.

I work with around 750 artists and about 3,000 farmers from various states, including Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Ladakh, Chhattisgarh and Assam. We also work with artists from Sri Lanka. Our products are delivered globally; we have a tie-up with Amazon and Flipkart.

Some of our most popular products are handicrafts, paintings, organic rice varieties (18 kinds at the moment) and honey. The honey comes from across India, even from as far as Ladakh, and is one of our bestsellers. It is multi-floral and wild, not extracted from a beekeeper's range, rather straight from the forest. We distil it using only a cotton filter and sell it without adding any preservatives. The foods we sell are cultivated in the old ways; our products are lab-tested and certified, even though no buyer has asked us for certification. We have been able to build that kind of goodwill. The annual turnover of Universal Tribes is over ₹2,00,00,000.

When I first attended the Samvaad Tribal Leadership Programme (TLP), our enterprise was a start-up and had only been around for six months; we had about 130 artisans and farmers with us. The fellowship of friends I created here introduced me to many people. We connected with some of our most popular artisans and farmers through them, be it Ladakh Baskets (from where we get apricots) or Prakash Gothkar's firm that supplies us honey. I was able to build my brand because of the TLP.

The associated tribal conclave Samvaad has been my research and development destination. I have attended it with our artists. Not only do I meet potential partners each time, interacting with people and learning from them fills me with new energy. Knowing that I am not alone and there are people who have my back makes a big difference. Another thing I have learnt here is the importance of positioning art. If in the middle of ten abstract paintings, for instance, you exhibit a Gond painting, it will be assumed that the latter is also an abstract painting. So, we give indigenous art forms differentiated spaces and markers.

2020 led to the restructuring of almost all markets, worldwide. The initial lockdown was total. Small businesses were on the backfoot. Most of our inventory is perishable, and perish they did! As if it was not enough, I caught the virus. My condition was serious, and money flowed out on healthcare for the two months I took to get back on my feet. By then, our business was as good as shut. As it was a start-up, we didn't have the corpus to sustain for six months of financial inactivity.

I didn't know where to start. I didn't have new leads. Old clients weren't placing orders. I needed a new idea or a project soon. Despondent as I was, my inner voice kept reminding me that I started the company for a reason — to revitalise the livelihoods of tribal artists, artisans and forest-produce gatherers; how could I stop!

So, the whole team reconnected and we had a word with all our artisans and farmers and discussed the ground reality, as is. Then I asked them if they would be willing to resume business relations with us, even though there is no ray of hope in sight. They wanted work to start, so they decided to support us with stock for an extended credit period. Inventory was set. Now, we had to find the market.

We switched our business-to-business model to a business-to-consumer model. We acquired channels for home deliveries and relaunched. It was an instant success. Our artisans and farmers heaved a sigh of relief.

High on this breakthrough, we introduced a Universal Tribes internship programme for students working from home, with a focus on sales, marketing and human resources. Till date, we have completed seven global projects, trained 10,000 students under the human resources domain, and 50,000 under sales and marketing by placing them with different companies and corporate houses. Many trainees got back to us later saying the internship has boosted their confidence, communication skills and bolstered their approach to work. We were able to secure the top trainees pre-placement offers. Today, we have tie-ups with 70 colleges and universities.

With the income we have generated from this enterprise, we have developed our own supply chain. We directly source from artisans and farmers and deliver it to the end users. It takes a maximum of three to five days to deliver our products anywhere in India.

No artisan or farmer in our network has faced financial distress, since. With the support of the government, we have been able to safely procure products and deliver them to customers. We pay every vendor on time. The factor that has worked in our favour is that many people, of late, in a bid to eat and live healthier, are opting for organic products.

Going forward, we are developing an Amazon-like platform that will showcase and deliver authentic Indian tribal products worldwide. Let the world see the power, the freedom, the integrity of indigenous foods and arts — wild honeys, traditional millets, the ever-unfolding Gond paintings, the rhythm of Warli art — and how they hold their own against odds!

India is among the top 10 producers of honey in the world. As food habits shift, demand for organic honey is going up.

Rajat Raghatwan
Founder, Universal Tribes.
TLP Fellow - 2018.
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Healing Touch of Healthcare

Dr. Unnikrishnan Payyappallimana

We all know; we have seen it first-hand, even experienced it. Public healthcare in our country, at best, remains non-existent in terms of the 'last-mile'. Millions of people live on the fringes of even primary healthcare. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends a standard ratio of one doctor for every 1,000 people. Data shows that only 11 among India's 28 states meet the WHO recommendation, while none qualify in the public healthcare sector.

If you take the tribal map of India, the facts and figures blink redder. According to the 2018 report, titled 'Tribal Health in India — Bridging the Gap and a Roadmap for the Future', headed by the public healthcare revolutionary Dr. Abhay Bang, almost 50 percent adolescent tribal girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years are underweight, the child mortality rate is 74 per 1,000 births as against 62 for the rest of India, and, "the tribal population in the country faces a triple burden of diseases". Triple burden refers to non-communicable, communicable, and reproductive health related diseases.

It automatically raises the question why are people who have well-evolved indigenous medicine systems, apart from access to public healthcare based on Western medicine, worse off?

Professor Debabar Banerji of the Centre for Social Medicine and Community Health at Jawaharlal Nehru University explains, "The interrelationships of the indigenous (traditional) and Western (modern) systems of medicine are a function of the interplay of social, economic, and political forces in the community. In India, Western medicine was used as a political weapon by the colonialists to strengthen the oppressing classes and to weaken the oppressed. Not only were the masses denied access to the Western system of medicine, but this system contributed to the decay and degeneration of the pre-existing indigenous systems. This Western and privileged-class orientation of the health services has been actively perpetuated and promoted by the postcolonial leadership of India."

The overall philosophy for pandemic control in the international community has been the dominant lens of the biomedical model, which focuses on vaccines and drugs. It does not encourage the involvement of ancient local health traditions.

The traditional medical systems in India can be broadly classified into codified systems such as Ayurveda and Siddha, which are documented in a large corpus of classical literature as well as the non-codified folk healing traditions, which are ecosystem and ethnic community specific. They have a symbiotic relationship with the idea of health and wellbeing. For example, a major part of the Sutrasthana of the Indian classical text Astanga Samgraha (500 ADE) explains various concepts (dinacharya — daily routine, ritucharya — seasonal activities, and sadvritta — code of conduct for mental health) to maintain wellbeing. It sees health as a many-sided equilibrium (samya). It determines health as the relationship of interdependent biological, psychological, spiritual, ecological, and metaphysical factors. The same expressions can be observed as a living heritage in diverse forms in the varied locally-rooted healing practices across the country. However, this knowledge and its careers have been rapidly eroding.

Rising healthcare costs and increasing debt burden on account of the increasing commodification of private healthcare systems is a major challenge across communities. But, as we have seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, there is growing interest in self-care and wellness through traditional medicine. Multiple studies show that nearly 75 percent of healthcare happens through family or community support without professional help being sought.

The rapidly increasing burden of lifestyle diseases poses a new challenge for a curative approach. It highlights the importance of synergising efforts to improve access to key promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative health interventions for all at an affordable cost. Increasing inequities within health systems could be addressed to a considerable extent by empowering individuals, families, and communities to manage simple health conditions and focus on preventive and promotive care.

There are rich and diverse tribal healing traditions across different biogeographic zones which have huge potential to contribute to the primary healthcare of remote communities. There is a need to document, assess, and promote relevant practices for simple ailments within households and communities for self-care, based on contextual health needs and available medicinal plants. A primary need is to create confidence in communities about their rich healing heritage.

In this context it is vital to create a systematic approach to self-healthcare through focused health promotion, community participation, multi-stakeholder networking, use of appropriate digital platforms, and renewal of the values of people-led healthcare. It is also critical to develop appropriate national legislation, financing, and institutional mechanisms to support self-care.

This perspective is also recognised in India's National Health Policy, 2017. India formed the Ministry of Ayush in 2014 with a vision to revive the

Rising healthcare cost is a major challenge. Women healers from Madhya Pradesh provide cost-effective solutions for issues related to maternal and neonatal health.

knowledge of our ancient systems of medicine and ensure the optimal development and propagation of the indigenous schools of healthcare. The Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) community had been asked to help with the pandemic. The Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) community had been involved in COVID-19 control, as it was with the 2002 SARS epidemic.

While it is important to have training and skill-development of traditional healers, it is equally important to have systems for assessing and recognising prior learning and experience based on a minimum standard of competency with respect to different health conditions.

The University of Trans-Disciplinary Health Sciences and Technology (TDU), established in 2013 by the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Tradition, the Quality Council of India, and a network of traditional healers across the country, have initiated accreditation of prior learning of traditional healers in different states.

For instance, the Chhattisgarh State Healers' Association has started training communities in self-help products and practices for immunity modulation and disease prevention.

Local healers associations have implemented large programmes like the government's herbal garden project for homes and schools. They help identify the local recourse for major health issues. Local enterprises then developed simple healthcare products that support local livelihoods.

Such programmes relate not just to individual self-care, but also to the community in terms of health and livelihoods, while assuring the conservation and protection of local resources and inter-generational knowledge. This approach contrasts with a purely biomedical one that focuses only on the disease and not on broader social and environmental perspectives.

Microbial resistance to antibiotics is a growing problem that threatens humans and animals across the globe and that has led to efforts for antibiotic stewardship. A core potential area of engagement for integrative medicine and AYUSH systems would be to explore and advance appropriate research for application of traditional formulations for preventive, curative, and promotive health management, with a view to reduce antibiotic and other chemical intake in human health.

In March 2020, the government approved AYUSH Health and Wellness Centres "to empower masses for 'self-care' to reduce the disease burden, out of pocket expenditure and to provide informed choice to the needy public".

To explore the full potential of Integrative Medicine, these centres could also document community traditional health practices in the form of local pharmacopoeias, create community gardens and learning resource centres for health, food, and nutrition to build a 'people-centred, self-reliant model' of health. Various medicinal plant conservation, community health, and rural livelihood efforts of the last two decades could well synergise with this approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic has strained health systems globally. The current international biomedical focus for disease control and policies fails to include the resource of a population's capacity to be self-reliant in its healthcare practices. The ancient wisdom of Local Health Traditions (LHTs) in India understands that health is about Svasthya, 'being rooted within'; a concept that includes the relationship and balance between the individual, their families, communities, and the environment in creating their own health.

Meanwhile, another hydra-headed concern has surfaced. Tribal knowledge of health and healing is increasingly being exploited for bioprospecting without due acknowledgement of the knowledge holders or the communities. While the National Biodiversity Act, 2002, mentions the need for equitable access to bioresources and associated knowledge, as well as equitable benefit-sharing with the knowledge holders in bioprospecting, its implementation in communities has been extremely poor.

Tribal communities continue to be exploited. There is a need for identifying good mechanisms to promote community innovations and support them through access and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Such incentives would instil greater confidence among the younger generation about the potential of their traditional heritage, thereby revitalising such traditions.

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His research interests include traditional medicine in public health, medical pluralism, traditional knowledge epistemology, and sustainable development.

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Insider **Outsider**

Unquiet Flows the Roro

Jiren Topno

Growing up in the outskirts of Chaibasa in the Kolhan region in the 1970s, a very small town in the undivided state of Bihar, we spent hours upon hours flying kites and playing games — marbles, chhur, kabaddi, sat khapri, gobar danda, jhank-bandar, lattu, and gilli danda. We would go to the forest to gather berries, flowers and mangoes — different produce in different seasons. We knew a lot about the animals, both friendly and dangerous. We knew what crops are cultivated in which season and what techniques are used.

We knew that our band of friends were not from a single tribe. We were Ho, Munda, Santhal and Oraon. Then there were some people who were non-indigenous. We called them dikus — outsiders. Some were Hindus and some Muslims. Downstream the river Roro, by which my village lies, were people whose livelihoods depended on pottery and tannery. They were called Harijans and considered untouchables by some dikus.

We had little to do with these labels. It did not matter who was bathing in the river when we went for a swim. We didn't pay heed to the undercurrents of the adult world.

Going to school, we would see processions of thousands of people, carrying traditional weapons, shouting slogans, headed towards Chaibasa; the small town was the district headquarters. Elders said these were protests of a movement called Jharkhand Alag Prant (Statehood for Jharkhand region). Sometimes, youth dissenters roughhoused on streets and stopped people from going to work. We would sneak through the barricades. We heard that they were agitating for a better life for the indigenous peoples.

By the time I was in high school, I had begun to take interest in the movement. I had classmates who came from far-flung villages, where no roads, health facilities, schools or colleges existed. Boys and girls walked miles, carrying their trunks and beddings on their heads to catch a bus to Chaibasa. Here they had to live in decrepit hostels to be able to attend school.

Villagers trudged along dusty roads for hours to reach the weekly market in Chaibasa, which is also where the only hospital was. The region is malaria-prone. Many people lost their lives because they couldn't make it to the hospital on time. Kolhan was a developmental abyss. Tribal students who managed to graduate against severe odds could not get government jobs, even against vacancies; the administration seemed to be running with its eyes wide shut.

Till the late 1960s Kolhan was almost completely indigenous. The downturn began in the 1970s when more and more outsiders began to settle in the region. They had a better understanding of the money market and they prospered in jobs and businesses in and around the now-growing industries. In a very short time, the migrants took control of the new opportunities, bringing in more of their kith and kin. Faced with fierce competition and cultural nepotism, many tribal youth were forced to leave the state. The unregulated profiteering from natural resources — forests, lands, rivers — had long troubled the people of Kolhan; now it turned into anger.

The protests exploded with tremendous force under the guidance of some selfless leaders, who had the loyalty of the masses. The Jharkhand Alag Prant movement grew.

I still remember the scenes as if it were yesterday: how audaciously our youth stood their ground before police forces. Occasionally, we also met hardliners who created mischief and hurled petty bombs at government facilities. Many of them landed behind bars. For the most part, people showed dedication, risk appetite, and commitment, and persevered for the common cause — an indigenous state of Jharkhand, breaking away from Bihar, where indigenous people would be "able to contribute as women and men of honour, compatriots as having place of honour in the national life of India." They dreamt of enjoying dignified growth of their languages and culture, protection of domicile rights, preservation of natural resources, rightful recognition of tribal freedom fighters and history, priority in opportunities, and re-establishment of traditional governance systems.

By the time I was in college, the great leaders of my childhood days had become politicians; morality and selflessness had given way to greed. I cannot say whether their decline was self-initiated or imposed as a plan by way of temptations to subdue the movement. Probably both. The people did not know which direction to take and whom to look up to.

It was during this gap Left-wing extremism took hold; many disillusioned youth leaders joined them overtly or covertly, and were now tagged 'extremists', 'anti-nationals', and 'criminals'. When police began to nab them, they were forced to go underground. Thus, the next generation of leadership for the movement was almost wiped out.

It took a bit of time, but some self-inspired, educated leaders entered politics. Academics and civil society activists began to propagate the core values of indigenousness. They started to bring different communities under one umbrella. This second category of thought leaders stayed out of politics and ceaselessly worked to strengthen

Growing up in the 1970s, we would go to a nearby forest to gather berries, flowers and mangoes — different produce in different seasons. We knew a lot about the animals, both friendly and dangerous.

tribal values and culture. Many youth took up the responsibility for research and documentation of tribal history, anthropology, and sociology. Together, the reformist initiatives created forceful cultural assertion, giving impetus to the dwindling movement.

On November 15, 2000, Jharkhand was declared an independent state. That should have been a golden win. However, the nascent state found its people divided politically, religiously, ethnically, educationally, and philosophically, because the fundamental objective of the movement — dignified recognition of the indigenous people and indigenousness — had been ignored in governmental policies for far too long. The reign was in the hands of local leaders, but they were disunited; the implementation of the long-awaited dream never did take off.

There was no one left who could reach out to the hearts of the masses to lead them to the Dream like the Marang Gomke (Great Leader) — Jaipal Singh Munda.

It may be late in this piece to evoke the Marang Gomke, but it is important. Many authors, academicians and historians have captured his life and work. He was the pioneer of the indigenous cause at the national level — not only campaigning for 'reservation' rights, but also for a separate state for the tribes of central India. I choose a contemporary author to give you a brief glimpse.

"The first report on minority rights, made public in late August 1947, provided for reservation for Untouchables only. Muslims were denied the right, which in the circumstances was to be expected. However, one member [of the Constituent Assembly of India] regretted that "the most needy, the most deserving group of adibasis [tribals] has been completely left out of the picture.

"The member was Jaipal Singh, himself an adivasi, albeit of a rather special kind. Jaipal was a Munda from Chotanagpur, the forested plateau of South Bihar peopled by numerous tribes all more-or-less distinct from caste Hindu society. Sent by missionaries to study in Oxford, he made a name there as a superb hockey player. He obtained a Blue, and went on to captain the Indian team that won the gold medal in the 1928 Olympic Games.

"On his return to India Jaipal did not, as his sponsors hoped, preach the Gospel, but came to invent a kind of gospel of his own. This held that the tribals were the 'original inhabitants' of the subcontinent — hence the term "adibasi" or "adivasi", which means precisely that. Jaipal formed an Adibasi Mahasabha in 1938 which asked for a separate state of Jharkhand, to be carved out of Bihar. To the tribals of Chotanagpur, he was their marang gomke, or 'great leader'. In the Constituent Assembly he came to represent the tribals not just of his native plateau, but of all India."

— India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy by Ramachandra Guha

We need tribal leadership with integrity, vision, and knowledge. I do not mean only political leadership, but leadership in all spheres — traditional governance, academia, entrepreneurship, development, bureaucracy, and media.

We need a new cohort of charismatic, honest leaders. They must form a united platform on which discourses can find a consensus.

With Samvaad, my colleagues and I foster such a platform. The all-India ecosystem works at a multidisciplinary level — dialogue platforms at central and regional fora; a dedicated tribal youth leadership programme; language and literature preservation initiatives that promote writing, storytelling, and filmmaking; exposures for tribal cuisine to reach mainstream tables; capacity-building of artists and artisans to retail in domestic and overseas markets; support to tribal healing practices so that they align with scientific certifiability; new stages for the performing arts; and a fellowship of action-based research.

Likeminded initiatives can join hands so that the indigenous way of life becomes the way not only for the adivasis, but the world. It is a tangible way forward for the planet and all its inhabitants. I have seen glimpses of what that idyllic world can be, growing up on the banks of the Roro.

Born in Jharkhand's Chaibasa to a Munda family, Jiren Topno is a double graduate in Economics and Philosophy. He obtained both college degrees in the state of Tamil Nadu. He received his Masters in Economics from the Delhi School of Economics and Business Administration from the Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur.

In his initial years as a working professional, he chose teaching, and worked in various schools in Jharkhand. He has been a Human Resources and Corporate Social Responsibility professional with Tata Steel since 2003. Currently, he is the Head of Tribal Culture, Tata Steel Foundation.

Lost in Garga

Mritunjay Kumar

Cities come up around waters. Mine was built sometime in the 1960s on the banks of Garga — a small tributary to the mighty Damodar. Bokaro in eastern India was a planned city developed by the government as an industrial hub.

In its nearly 50-kilometre course, Garga supplies water to the various plants and ancillary units. A dam on it, right outside the city, off National Highway 23, was a popular picnic spot in my childhood. The river was shallow for the most part, except during monsoons when the sluice gates would open, throwing it in spate.

There were stone quarries along its banks. The quarriers used dynamite charges to break large rocks. The sound of the blasts would excite us. Exhausted quarries were allowed to flood. Elders would caution us not to venture too close.

From the balcony of my parents' small government quarters, we had an uninhibited view of the river and the villages on the other side. We had heard that they were adivasi villages.

Like most Indians I did not know much about the indigenous peoples. I had come across, in passing, names of regional heroes like Birsa Munda, Tilka Manjhi, and Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu in textbooks — historical figures from the region who had led protest movements against landlords and colonialists, but I hadn't got the context. I had heard that adivasis were displaced to build and expand Bokaro. All around I saw construction and expansion. I didn't know what displacement meant. It didn't occur to me that the roads and bridges and manufacturing units were once homes and lands of other communities.

Digging into my memories, I can see and hear the adivasis imperceptibly. They lived in the shadows of my childhood — humble, inconspicuous, quiet. They were vegetable sellers at the weekly markets. They hawked local wares around neighbourhoods. They were guards in schools and offices. A rare few were teachers and office workers. They didn't assume spaces in our world; I cannot remember any particular face.

Bokaro had many open grounds, where we would play cricket or football on most days. Inevitably, every other day, balls would get lost. Our pocket money didn't stretch to cover the routine setback. So, ignoring cautions issued by our parents, we would go off to play hide-and-seek among the tall bushes and rocks by the river. The soft, wet sand was great to make cannonballs to hurl at each other. The children on the other side of the Garga were seldom visible. A few came to our school, maybe because their parents worked in a plant. They kept to their farm and village limits. There were many makeshift bridges. We never crossed it, neither did they.

I was about 15 when I left Bokaro for higher studies. This was a year before Jharkhand became an independent state — the result of a long battle for a separate tribal homeland. I read in the newspapers that the new state would give the indigenous communities more power and influence. I wondered why. After all, this was my homeland too.

Every time I returned for a visit, from the window of our quarters, I saw the adivasi villages retreat further. After a decade or so, I could see them no more. The Garga by then had become a narrow, slow-moving sludge of household waste. Ever so slowly, struggling to find a sense of home in a megalopolis nearly 2,000 kilometres away, reading a lot to kill loneliness, the layers of truth and history began to sink in.

It is imperative that I recall the heroes who were brutally subdued. It may give you an insight into the current narrative.

Birsa Munda (1875-1900), also known as Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth) was a tribal freedom fighter and a folk hero from Ulihatu. He belonged to the Munda tribe. Birsa's Ulgulan, or a call for revolution against colonial incursions into tribal homelands, had shaken the foundations of British rule in the region. He started preaching social reforms and an indigenous code of conduct, thus founding the Birsait faith. Even today, thousands of followers across Jharkhand and Odisha revere him as their god — Bhagwan Birsa.

Tilka Manjhi (1750-1785) was one of the first indigenous freedom fighters to lead an armed resistance of his Santhal people against British rule. In the years following the Bengal Famine of 1770, the masses were suffering. Tilka raided the treasury of the British East India Company and distributed the wealth among the needy. With the support of the masses, he started the Santhal Hul (revolt), which he led till 1784.

Sidhu Murmu and Kanhu Murmu were brothers, who also belonged to the Santhal community. Frustrated with the exploitation at the hands of the British and the local landlords appointed by them, they started the Santhal rebellion (1855–1856) and led more than 50,000 people in an armed resistance. This was even before the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, which is considered by many to be the first war of Indian independence.

If you read about them in depth, you will find that these heroes were fighting against the British as much as they were fighting for a way of life — the adivasi way.

Three decades have passed. As I spend more and more time with young, indigenous leaders, who are fighting for their lands, livelihoods, cultural importance, and significance in the sustainability dialogue, I feel a burden. This is a worthy burden. One, that probably all of us working alongside indigenous communities carry. We have wronged our First People as a country.

Some of us have pens. Some of us have stages. Some of us work with ideas, projects, plans, movements. I have a camera.

I won't offer you portraits, because I run the risk of romanticising. Instead, I give you glimpses of adivasi homelands from Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. They are the essence of what we are looking for as a planetary race — quiet, clean, kind, and green.

Mritunjay is a documentary photographer with over a decade of experience in content creation. Hailing from an agricultural community, he has extensively photographed and written about issues of indigenous India, migration, and rural livelihoods. His work has been published and exhibited.

Earlier, he has worked with advertising and communication design firms Ogilvy and Geometry Global in planning roles in Mumbai, and as a data scientist with an international firm overseas.

His work is enriched by his diverse experience, which includes a stint with the Indian Railways. He cherishes the diversities, for they help him understand the human journey better.

Samvaad — A Tribal Conclave

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