

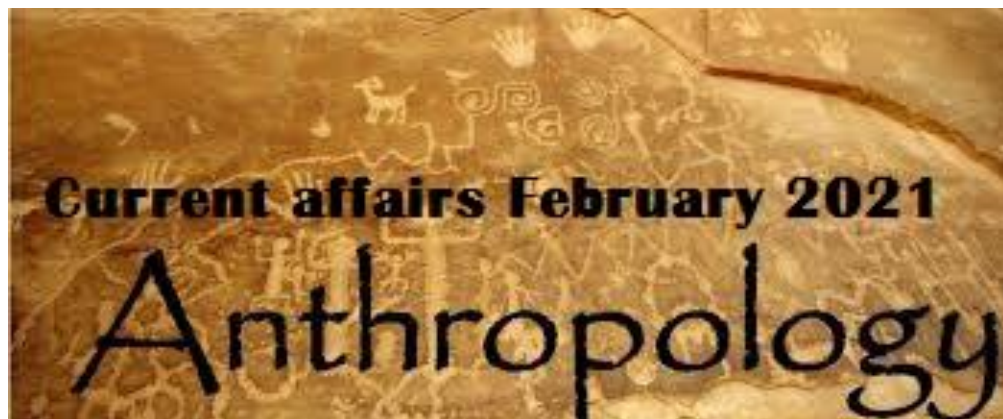
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## PHYSICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

### 1. Ancestry estimation perpetuates racism, white supremacy

Newswise – BINGHAMTON, NY -- Ancestry estimation -- a method used by forensic anthropologists to determine ancestral origin by analyzing bone structures -- is rooted in “race science” and perpetuates white supremacy, according to a new paper by a forensic anthropologist at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

By themselves, bones seem somewhat uniform to the untrained eye. They lack the traits we so often use to categorize fellow humans: hair texture, the shape of nose and eye, skin pigmentation.

Forensic anthropologists know that race isn't based in biological fact, but in a history and culture that assigns meaning to physical traits that occur among different human populations. Why, then, are they still relying on a tool from the field's negative roots in “race science”?

Binghamton University Associate Professor of Anthropology Elizabeth DiGangi addresses this issue in a recent article in *The American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. Co-authored with Jonathan Bethard of the University of South Florida, “Uncloaking a Lost Cause: Decolonizing ancestry estimation in the United States” explores a practice that dates back to the very origins of forensic anthropology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The field was initially created by anatomists who had human skeletons in their museums or medical schools; they began studying the bones to see what could be learned from their features. Ancestry estimation, which analyzes bone structures – especially those in the face or skull – to determine ancestral origin was among the early developments.

However, the practice was originally anything but neutral: scientists used these features to classify races they had already arbitrarily defined, with the goal of proving the superiority of European men. It should be noted, DiGangi said, that these scientists were all European men themselves.

When forensic anthropology became formalized later in the 20th century, it kept the practice of ancestry estimation.

“Since the time of professionalization of the field in the late 1970s, we’ve just taken as fact that ancestry estimation could and should be done,” she said.

### **Social vs. biological race**

The categories we’re all familiar with from census forms to employment applications – African-American/Black, European-American/white, Asian-American and so forth – are examples of *social race*. These categories are not only a human creation, but they have changed through the years based on government priorities and social sentiment. In the early 20th century, for example, Irish and Italian immigrants weren’t considered white, although they are today.

“Biological race is the myth that there is something inherently biological about the differences between these constructed groups, that the human species is divided into races. This myth has been debunked for decades,” DiGangi said. “The problem is that science was responsible for teaching the world that biological race was real, yet has not fully succeeded at rescinding it, explaining why we were wrong and atoning for the gross miscommunication.”

These concepts can influence how we interpret otherwise neutral phenomena, such as bones. Like any other part of the body, bones have subtle variations from individual to individual, such as the precise location of a hole where a nerve passes through or a roughened area for a muscle attachment. Ancestry estimation particularly relies on skull features and the bones that make up the face, known as morphoscopic traits.

It has long been assumed that morphoscopic traits indicate a person’s ancestry, and there has been some research into specific feature variations among different human groups. However, research has never determined the extent to which these features are inherited, making their connection to particular groups largely anecdotal, DiGangi explained. There are other problems, too: If you were to study whether these traits could be inherited, how do you determine the demarcation line between different groups?

In other words, ancestry estimation isn’t grounded in good science.

Those defending its use, however, say that it's a needed tool. In the United States' complex system of death investigation, forensic anthropologists work alongside law enforcement when it comes to identifying human remains. The morphoscopic traits, dental traits and skull measurements that underpin ancestry estimation would be meaningless to investigators unless they can be mapped onto social racial categories.

But it's hard to say whether ancestry estimation really helps identify people, the authors point out. Estimates tend to rely on cases where a body is successfully identified – and don't take the failures into account.

And then there is also the troublesome legacy of white supremacy that underpins policing in the United States. In the paper, the authors hypothesized that racial bias on the part of the investigators could lead to delayed or nonexistent identification for people of color, and issued an urgent call for research.

"People in the forensic sciences have a tendency to think that because we work for justice for victims, we are above the fray and racism is not applicable to us or the institutions we work for," DiGangi said. "As far as I'm concerned, it's well past time for a reality check."

### **Changing a culture of exclusion**

Today, the discipline once created by white anatomists is called biological anthropology, partially to distinguish it from its earlier racist roots. We shouldn't forget that history, but



instead “own it and actively atone for it, which includes ensuring that the discipline is more equitable and inclusive,” DiGangi explained.

Biological anthropology has made some progress in this area, but forensic anthropology, a subset of that larger field, hasn't done the same.

Today, 87% of forensic anthropologists are white and DiGangi is a rarity. In fact, she's the only board-certified person who has identified as Black in the history of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology, which was established in 1977.

While diversity is sorely needed, it has to be more than just a buzz phrase. Concrete actions need to be taken not only on the board level, but in anthropology departments, student organizations, and undergraduate and graduate mentoring relationships, all of which lead future forensic anthropologists to the discipline.

These actions include increasing transparency and atoning for the past and present harms done to a variety of populations: people of color, women, the LGBTQ+ community and those who aren't able-bodied or neurotypical. One of those harms is a history of exclusion.

“Leadership may think that they are not exclusionary, but any organization whose membership consists overwhelmingly of white people *is* exclusionary, and the organization and its members have a responsibility to figure out the factors that have led to that and fix it,” she said.

Organizations need specific policies and procedures to create a welcoming environment. Think of a typical summertime barbecue: no one is going to invite themselves in, especially if the other attendees don't look like them and the food and music are otherwise unfamiliar, DiGangi said. But if the barbecue attendees are welcoming, engage with that new individual, make adjustments to meet their needs and truly listen, the situation changes.

This isn't an issue unique to forensic anthropology.

"All of the sciences, and certainly the other forensic disciplines, need to face the issue of how racism and other forms of discrimination have been a key force in everything from our membership recruitment and retention to our methods and how we interpret the results," she said.

## **2. Earliest-known fossil primate discovered in Montana**

A new study published Feb. 24 in the journal Royal Society Open Science documents the earliest-known fossil evidence of primates.

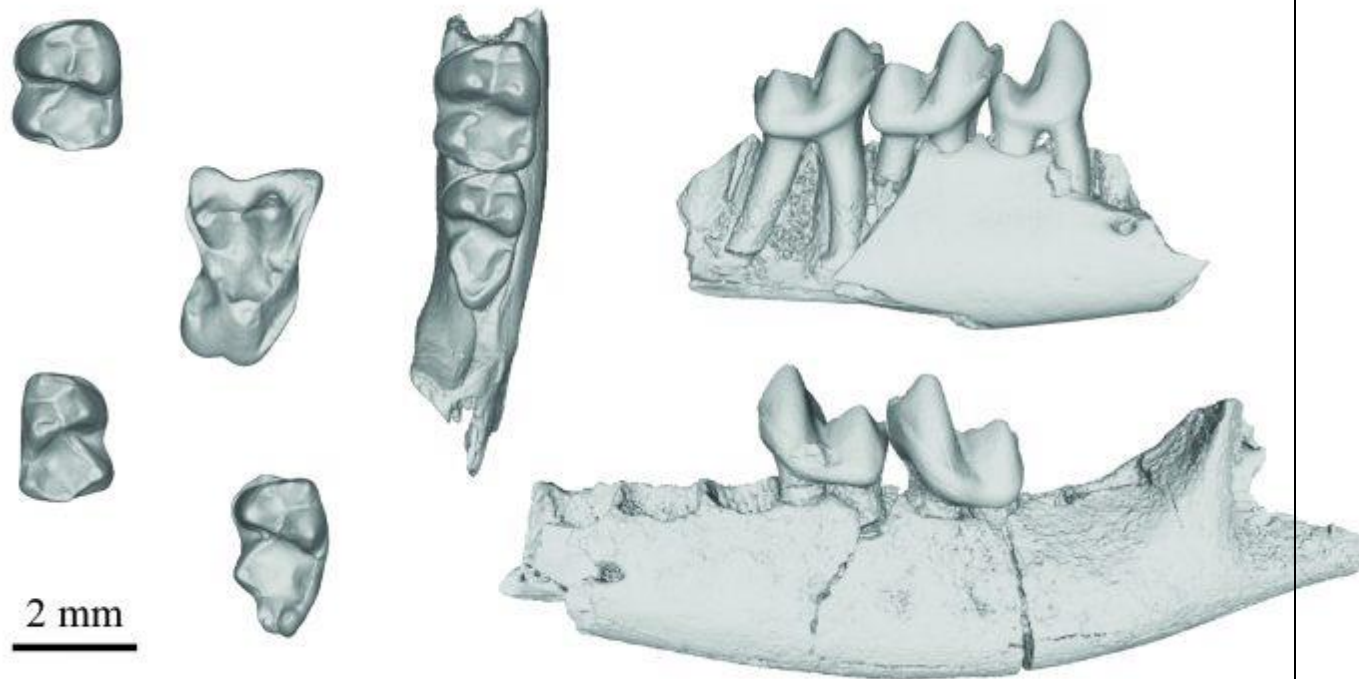
A team of 10 researchers from across the U.S. analyzed several fossils of *Purgatorius*, the oldest genus in a group of the earliest-known primates called plesiadapiforms. These ancient mammals were small-bodied and ate specialized diets of insects and fruits that varied by species. These newly described specimens are central to understanding primate ancestry and paint a picture of how life on land recovered

after the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event 66 million years ago that wiped out all dinosaurs – except for birds – and led to the rise of mammals.

Gregory Wilson Mantilla, a University of Washington professor of biology and curator of vertebrate paleontology at the UW's Burke Museum of Natural History & Culture, co-led the study with Stephen Chester of Brooklyn College and the City University of New York. The team analyzed fossilized teeth found in the Hell Creek area of northeastern Montana. The fossils, which are now part of the collections at the University of California Museum of Paleontology, are estimated to be 65.9 million years old, about 105,000 to 139,000 years after the mass extinction event. Based on the age of the fossils, the team estimates that the ancestor of all primates – including plesiadapiforms and today's primates such as lemurs, monkeys and apes – likely emerged by the Late Cretaceous and lived alongside large dinosaurs.

“It's mind blowing to think of our earliest archaic primate ancestors,” said Wilson Mantilla. “They were some of the first mammals to diversify in this new post-mass extinction world, taking advantage of the fruits and insects up in the forest canopy.”

The fossils include two species of *Purgatorius*: *Purgatorius janisae* and a new species described by the team named *Purgatorius mckeeveri*. Three of the teeth found have distinct features compared to any previously known *Purgatorius* species and led to the description of the new species.



High resolution CT scans of an assortment of fossilized teeth and jaw bones of *Purgatorius*. Gregory Wilson Mantilla/Stephen Chester

*Purgatorius mckeeveri* is named after Frank McKeever, who was among the first residents of the area where the fossils were discovered, and also the family of John and Cathy McKeever, who have since supported the field work where the oldest specimen of this new species was discovered.

“This was a really cool study to be a part of, particularly because it provides further evidence that the earliest primates originated before the extinction of non-avian dinosaurs,” said co-author Brody Hovatter, a UW graduate student in Earth

and space sciences. “They became highly abundant within a million years after that extinction.”

“This discovery is exciting because it represents the oldest dated occurrence of archaic primates in the fossil record,” said Chester. “It adds to our understanding of how the earliest primates separated themselves from their competitors following the demise of the dinosaurs.”

Co-author on the study was the late William Clemens who was a professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley and former director of the UC Museum of Paleontology. Additional co-authors are Jason Moore and Wade Mans of the University of New Mexico; Courtney Sprain of the University of Florida; William Mitchell of Minnesota IT Services; Roland Mundil of the Berkeley Geochronology Center; and Paul Renne of UC Berkeley and the Berkeley Geochronology Center. The research was funded by the National Science Foundation, the UC Museum of Paleontology, the Myhrvold and Havranek Charitable Family Fund, the UW, the CUNY and the Leakey Foundation.

### **3. Ten Things Archaeology Tells Us about Neanderthals**

Rebecca Wragg Sykes is an archaeologist and author of the critically acclaimed bestseller *Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art*. An honorary fellow at the University of Liverpool, she is also a cofounder of TrowelBlazers, an online resource highlighting the role of women in archaeology and the earth sciences.



**Image description: A woman with short, dark hair and glasses is wearing a blue turtleneck shirt. In the background, there is a cave opening that looks out onto green land with mountains and the sky on the horizon.**

## **Around the cave mouth are silhouettes of figures depicting Neanderthals.** Charlotte Corden

When they were first discovered in 1856, Neanderthals were a scientific sensation, and in many ways they're still leaving us surprised and fascinated over 160 years later. Today, the field of ancient genetics has transformed our understanding of early human history and the Neanderthals, but archaeology has been undergoing its own quiet revolution. In the past three decades, advances in methods from excavation to analysis have painted a captivating fresh portrait of these, our closest relatives. Here are 10 things we've learned.

**1. Neanderthals were survivors.** Back in the 1850s, nobody was sure how long ago Neanderthals had lived, other than the fact they had existed alongside species now vanished from Europe, such as reindeer, and long-extinct beasts like woolly rhinoceros. Once means for directly dating archaeological sites were developed, the true chronology of Neanderthals became clear. They emerged as an anatomically distinctive population around 350,000 years ago, and what's more, between that point and their vanishing from the record around 40,000 years ago, they survived *six* global climate cycles. Far from arctic environment specialists, they preferred to avoid extreme cold, and should equally be thought of as adapted to steppe-tundra, forest, and coasts, spreading all the way from Wales to Palestine, through into Central Asia and Siberia.

**2. They weren't stuck in a big game rut.** Theories that perhaps Neanderthals vanished because they were poor



hunters have abounded. Yet evidence from close study of animal bones, chemical analysis, and microremains in sediment or even their own dental calculus shows they were highly flexible in dietary terms. They took the best of whatever was in the environments around them. That included tackling megafauna like mammoth, medium-sized prey, such as deer, and even small game and shoreline resources. Mediterranean Neanderthals even had a particular way of roasting tortoise. But plants were also on the menu, whether tubers like waterlily roots or seeds and fruits, some of which needed cooking.

**3. Neanderthals were artisans and innovators.** Notions that Neanderthals were inherently unsophisticated and lived in a state of technological stasis persist. But careful study and new finds confirm they mastered many methods for taking apart stone, had varied cultures across time and space, and skillfully worked wood, shell, and even bone. Remarkably, they also produced the first synthetic material: birch tar. Neanderthals in what is today Italy, even invented another adhesive for multipart tools by mixing pine resin and beeswax.

**4. Home was where the hearth is.** Remarkable twenty-first century excavation methods allow us to pick apart Neanderthal living sites in mind-boggling detail. Archaeologists might only trowel away a few centimeters in a field season, but these can contain *centuries* of occupation. By recording the spatial positions in 3D, then digitally or manually refitting fragments of stone and bone back together, different sub-layers and activity areas can be identified.



Sediment analysis reveals midden zones, multiphase hearth fires, and even the potential use of animal hide mats. It's in Neanderthal sites that we see the emergence of human hearth-centered living.

**5. Neanderthals talked to each other.** Recent research shows that Neanderthal voice boxes could make similar sounds to ours, and their inner ears were tuned into the same frequencies: speech. But genetic studies suggest subtle differences, meaning that the cognitive foundation and expression underlying their language was not the same. What might they have talked about? Perhaps stone and seasons, animal and plant lore. Shared memories woven together may have become the first hearthside tales.

Sediment analysis reveals midden zones, multiphase hearth fires, and even the potential use of animal hide mats. It's in Neanderthal sites that we see the emergence of human hearth-centered living.

**6. They lived in small populations (mostly).** Modern archaeological research has picked away at one of the trickier problems in understanding Neanderthals: How many of them lived together? High resolution sites (where sediments accumulated slowly and short occupations can be discerned) confirm that groups likely contained no more than 20 individuals, and sometimes split up to go off into the landscape. But DNA shows that they weren't all genetically inbred, and persistent long-distance stone movements point to territories covering hundreds of kilometers.

**7. There was such a thing as Neanderthal aesthetics.** A growing body of evidence supported by meticulous analysis indicates that Neanderthals sometimes engaged with materials in ways that have no clear function. This includes altering surfaces by carefully incising lines on bones and applying mineral pigments, sometimes mixed in recipes with other things like sparkly fool's gold (iron pyrite). When we see pigments being used on unusual objects like fossil shells and raptor talons, it's a strong indication that Neanderthals possessed a proto-aesthetic sense.

**8. Aggression was not the basis of their society.**

Assumptions that Neanderthals were by nature violent are not reflected in their bones or the archaeology. Hunting must have been collaborative, and the spoils were systematically butchered and transported elsewhere to waiting mouths. In some places it's even possible to see hints of resources being shared between hearths. Without intense competition over food, Neanderthal social groups were more likely based around close friendships, and perhaps open to meeting strangers.

**9. Neanderthals had different ways of dealing with the dead.** Debates over possible Neanderthal burials have existed since the early twentieth century, but a combination of revisiting old collections and excavating new skeletons has today's archaeologists homing in on two facts: First, it does appear that entire bodies were sometimes deposited, including in shallow pits. But even more interesting, Neanderthals were taking apart the bodies of the dead, sometimes consuming them even where food was abundant,

and using bones as tools. In one case, incising a skull with more than 30 tiny lines that have no practical explanation.

**10. We met them, many times.** One of the greatest revolutions in our knowledge of Neanderthals – that they did not *entirely* vanish – came with the first sequencing of the Neanderthal genome in 2010. A decade on, archaeology has revealed greater complexity. Early *Homo sapiens* were in Eurasia well before 100,000 years ago (Australia by 65,000 years ago), and further DNA samples and genetic analyses reveal multiple phases of interbreeding over this huge span of time, not just with Neanderthals, but with other hominins, including the little-known Denisovans. So unlike many of the first *H. sapiens* explorers who left no DNA traces in people today, the Neanderthals' bodies and way of life may have disappeared, but their genetic legacy lives on.

#### **4. Ancient Skeletal Hand Could Reveal Evolutionary Secrets**

A 4.4 million-year-old skeleton could show how early humans moved and began to walk upright, according to new research led by a Texas A&M anthropology professor.

Evolutionary expert Charles Darwin and others recognized a close evolutionary relationship between humans, chimps and gorillas based on their shared anatomies, raising some big questions: how are humans related to other primates, and exactly how did early humans move around? Research by a Texas A&M University professor may provide some answers.

Thomas Cody Prang, assistant professor of anthropology, and colleagues examined the skeletal remains of *Ardipithecus*

*ramidus* (“Ardi”), dated to 4.4 million years old and found in Ethiopia. One of Ardi’s hands was exceptionally well-preserved.

The researchers compared the shape of Ardi’s hand to hundreds of other hand specimens representing recent humans, apes and monkeys (measured from bones in museum collections around the world) to make comparisons about the kind of locomotor behavior used by the earliest hominins (fossil human relatives).

The results provide clues about how early humans began to walk upright and make similar movements that all humans perform today.

This discovery is described in a study published in the current issue of [\*Science Advances\*](#).

“Bone shape reflects adaptation to particular habits or lifestyles – for example the movement of primates – and by drawing connections between bone shape and behavior among living forms, we can make inferences about the behavior of extinct species, such as Ardi, that we can’t directly observe, Prang said.

“Additionally, we found evidence for a big evolutionary ‘jump’ between the kind of hand represented by Ardi and all later hominin hands, including that of Lucy’s species (a famous 3.2 million-year-old well-preserved skeleton found in the same area in the 1970s). This ‘evolutionary jump’ happens at a critical time when hominins are evolving adaptations to a more human-like form of upright walking, and the earliest

evidence for hominin stone-tool manufacture and stone-tool use, such as cut-marks on animal fossils, are discovered.”

Prang said the fact that Ardi represents an earlier phase of human evolutionary history is important because it potentially shines light on the kind of ancestor from which humans and chimpanzees evolved.

“Our study supports a classic idea first proposed by Charles Darwin in 1871, when he had no fossils or understanding of genetics, that the use of the hands and upper limbs for manipulation appeared in early human relatives in connection with upright walking,” he said. “The evolution of human hands and feet probably happened in a correlated fashion.”

Since Ardi is such an ancient species, it might retain skeletal features that were present in the last common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees. If this is true, it could help researchers place the origin of the human lineage – in addition to upright walking – into a clearer light.

“It potentially brings us one step closer to an explanation for how and why humans evolved our form of upright walking,” Prang said.

He added that the big change in hand anatomy between Ardi and all later hominins occurs at a time, roughly between 4.4 and 3.3 million years ago, coinciding with the earliest evidence of the loss of a grasping big toe in human evolution. This also coincides with the earliest known stone tools and stone cut-marked animal fossils.

He said it appears to mark a major change in the lifestyle and behavior of human relatives within this timeframe.

“We propose that it involves the evolution of more advanced upright walking, which enabled human hands to be modified by the evolutionary process for enhanced manual manipulation, possibly involving stone tools,” Prang said

## **5. A genetic variant inherited from Neanderthals reduces the risk of severe COVID-19**

DNA variants passed on to modern humans from Neanderthals can increase as well as decrease our ability to fight SARS-CoV-2, a new PNAS study finds.

- New research has found that a group of genes that reduces the risk of developing severe COVID-19 by around 20% is inherited from Neanderthals
- These genes, located on chromosome 12, code for enzymes that play a vital role in helping cells destroy the genomes of invading viruses
- The study suggests that enzymes produced by the Neanderthal variant of these genes are more efficient which helps protect against severe COVID-19
- This genetic variant was passed to humans around 60,000 years ago via interbreeding between modern humans and Neanderthals
- The genetic variant has increased in frequency over the last millennium and is now found in around half of people living outside Africa

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, impacts people in different ways after infection. Some experience only mild or no symptoms at all while others become sick enough to require hospitalization and may develop respiratory failure and die.

Now, researchers at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate University (OIST) in Japan and the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Biology in Germany have found that a group of genes that reduces the risk of a person becoming seriously ill with COVID-19 by around 20% is inherited from Neanderthals.

"Of course, other factors such as advanced age or underlying conditions such as diabetes have a significant impact on how ill an infected individual may become," said Professor Svante Pääbo, who leads the Human Evolutionary Genomics Unit at OIST. "But genetic factors also play an important role and some of these have been contributed to present-day people by Neanderthals."

Last year, Professor Svante Pääbo and his colleague Professor Hugo Zeberg reported in *Nature* that the greatest genetic risk factor so far identified, doubling the risk to develop severe COVID-19 when infected by the virus, had been inherited from Neanderthals.

Their latest research builds on a new study, published in December last year from the Genetics of Mortality in Critical Care (GenOMICC) consortium in the UK, which collected genome sequences of 2,244 people who developed severe COVID-19. This UK study pinpointed additional genetic

regions on four chromosomes that impact how individuals respond to the virus.

Now, in a study published today in *PNAS*, Professor Pääbo and Professor Zeberg show that one of the newly identified regions carries a variant that is almost identical to those found in three Neanderthals - a ~50,000-year-old Neanderthal from Croatia, and two Neanderthals, one around 70,000 years old and the other around 120,000 years old, from Southern Siberia.

Surprisingly, this second genetic factor influences COVID-19 outcomes in the opposite direction to the first genetic factor, providing protection rather than increasing the risk to develop severe COVID-19. The variant is located on chromosome 12 and reduces the risk that an individual will require intensive care after infection by about 22%.

"It's quite amazing that despite Neanderthals becoming extinct around 40,000 years ago, their immune system still influences us in both positive and negative ways today," said Professor Pääbo.

To try to understand how this variant affects COVID-19 outcomes, the research team took a closer look at the genes located in this region. They found that three genes in this region, called *OAS*, code for enzymes that are produced upon viral infection and in turn activate other enzymes that degrade viral genomes in infected cells.

"It seems that the enzymes encoded by the Neanderthal variant are more efficient, reducing the chance of severe



consequences to SARS-CoV-2 infections," Professor Pääbo explained.

The researchers also studied how the newly discovered Neanderthal-like genetic variants changed in frequency after ending up in modern humans some 60,000 years ago.

To do this, they used genomic information retrieved by different research groups from thousands of human skeletons of varying ages.

They found that the variant increased in frequency after the last Ice Age and then increased in frequency again during the past millennium. As a result, today it occurs in about half of people living outside Africa and in around 30% of people in Japan. In contrast, the researchers previously found that the major risk variant inherited from Neanderthals is almost absent in Japan.

"The rise in the frequency of this protective Neanderthal variant suggests that it may have been beneficial also in the past, maybe during other disease outbreaks caused by RNA viruses," said Professor Pääbo.

## 6. Mapping Human and Neanderthal Genomes

The Human Genome Project first published the modern human genome 20 years ago, and the Neanderthal genome was sequenced a little more than a decade ago. What do these maps mean for our understanding of humanity?

Back in 1990, researchers embarked on an epic project to map out all of human DNA: the Human Genome Project. Their first draft of the human genome was published 20 years ago today.

I find myself thinking: *Wow, it's been 20 whole years – yet it's only been 20 years!*

Genetics is a dizzyingly complex field that is still in its infancy. Because of that, new finds and advances have a lot of potential for misinterpretation and misuse. But the field has also served as a potent reminder of how similar we all are at the core – and how blended humanity has been throughout all of deep time.

Humans have more than 3 billion letter pairs of DNA in their genome: It turns out that less than 2 percent of that spells out around 20,000 specific genes, or sets of instructions that code for the proteins that make our tissues. All humans share the same basic set of genes (we all have a gene for earwax consistency, for example), but there are subtle variations in the DNA spelling of those genes from individual to individual that result in slightly different proteins (sticky versus dry earwax). The Human Genome Project mapped out both our genes and the DNA in between, and set out to see how these tiny variations in DNA are linked to variations in physical traits and disease. Overall, any given human being is about 99.9 percent similar, genetically, to any other human being.

All that is just for modern *Homo sapiens*, of course. As a researcher focused on human evolution and the lives of long-

extinct hominin populations, the Human Genome Project was just the beginning of avenues of research that I find incredibly exciting.

The Neanderthal Genome Project began in July of 2006, and in May of 2010 – just over a decade ago – researchers published the initial draft of the genome of one of our closest extinct relatives. Our genome overlaps with about 97–98 percent of that of Neanderthals, thanks to us sharing a common ancestor. (Many living things are surprisingly similar: Humans and chimps, for example, are only about 1.2–6 percent different from each other, depending on how you count.)

Human groups lived, moved, and mingled, and some traces of that world are left to us to tease out of our genome.

Thanks to this work, we now know details about Neanderthals that the archaeological record alone could never have provided. For example, fragments of DNA from specimens found in Spain and Italy showed that at least some Neanderthals likely had pale skin and reddish hair – although, interestingly, the variations for this coloring are different from the variants found in modern humans. Apparently, redheads among *Homo sapiens* evolved separately.

I am particularly interested in how Neanderthals and other early hominin populations used the plant and animal resources around them for food, tools, and other daily needs. DNA can provide clues in those arenas. For example, Neanderthals, like us, possessed a gene with the catchy name

TAS2R38 that controls the ability to taste bitter substances. Chances are this adaptation evolved in the human lineage to enable us to avoid foods that contain toxins, which often have a bitter taste.

In 2016, researchers examined a gene in both modern humans and Neanderthals that controls the body's response to carcinogenic hydrocarbons. They found that Neanderthals were up to 1,000 percent more sensitive to these carcinogens than humans but had more genetic variants that better neutralized the harmful effects. Maybe this was an adaptation that occurred as the result of early fire use as our hominin ancestors started to inhale carcinogenic smoke. That is still unclear.

## **7. Modern human origins cannot be traced back to a single point in time**

Genetic and fossil records do not reveal a single point where modern humans originated, /

Genetic and fossil records do not reveal a single point where modern humans originated, researchers have found.

Experts from the Museum, the Francis Crick Institute and the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History have partnered to untangle the different lines of ancestry in the evolution of our species, *Homo sapiens*.

They argue that no specific point in time can currently be identified when modern human ancestry was confined to a limited birthplace. The known patterns of the first appearance

of anatomical or behavioural traits that are often used to define *H. sapiens* fit a range of evolutionary histories.

Their new paper, published in *Nature*, reviews our current understanding of how modern human ancestry around the globe can be traced into the distant past, and which ancestors it passes through during our journey back in time.

Prof Chris Stringer, co-author and researcher at the Museum, says, 'Some of our ancestors will have lived in groups or populations that can be identified in the fossil record, whereas very little will be known about others.'

'Over the next decade, growing understanding of our complex origins should expand the geographic focus to regions previously considered peripheral to our evolution, such as Central and West Africa, the Indian subcontinent and southeast Asia.'

Three key phases in our ancestry are surrounded by major questions, including:

- the worldwide expansion of modern humans between 40,000 and 60,000 years ago and the last known contacts with archaic groups such as the Neanderthals and Denisovans
- an African origin of modern human diversity about 60,000 to 300,000 years ago
- the complex separation of modern human ancestors from archaic human groups about 300,000 to one million years ago

Co-author Pontus Skoglund from the Francis Crick Institute says, 'Contrary to what many believe, neither the genetic nor fossil records has so far revealed a defined time and place for the origin of our species.

'Such a point in time may not have existed, when the majority of our ancestry was found in a small geographic region and the traits we associate with our species appeared. For now, it would be useful to move away from the idea of a single time and place of origin.'

Interdisciplinary analysis of the growing genetic, fossil and archaeological records will undoubtedly reveal many new surprises about the roots of modern human ancestry.

## **8. Monkeying around: Study finds older primates father far fewer babies**

Summary:

Older male rhesus monkeys sire fewer offspring, even though they appear to be mating as much as younger monkeys with similarly high social status. Sperm quality or quantity, or the survival of infants, may decline with the age of the would-be father, the new study suggests. A new study has implications for understanding some age-related aspects of male reproductive health in primates, including humans.

Infertility is a worldwide clinical problem for human health that affects 8 to 12 percent of couples. A new study from Washington University in St. Louis has implications for

understanding some age-related aspects of male reproductive health in primates, including humans.

Older male rhesus monkeys sire fewer offspring, even though they appear to be mating as much as younger monkeys with similarly high social status. Sperm quality or quantity, or the survival of infants, may decline with the age of the would-be father, the new study suggests.

Researchers tracking a colony of free-ranging rhesus macaques in Puerto Rico reported their findings Aug. 3 in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

"There have been a number of studies that explore female reproductive senescence in humans and other primates, but comparatively little work on male reproductive senescence," said Krista Milich, assistant professor of biological anthropology in Arts & Sciences.

"In fact, male reproductive success is thought to be primarily impacted by access to fertile females, but in this paper, we challenge that assumption."

### **About the study**

Cayo Santiago is a small primate research island in Puerto Rico. It is home to a colony of rhesus macaques that was established in 1938 with approximately 400 wild-caught animals from India. At the time of this study, more than 1,200 monkeys lived on the island.

Researchers followed 21 adult males -- the highest ranking individuals in their social groups -- through breeding and

birth seasons in a single year. All babies born that year were genotyped to determine both maternal and paternal lineage.

"We found that older, high-ranking males who were mating with females and who we would normally expect to produce a lot of offspring in a given mating season were actually producing very few or no offspring," Milich said.

"These are males that we know sired many offspring in their younger years, based on genetic records," she said. "We know from our behavioral data that they had access to mating partners at rates that were similar to or even higher than other males of similar social status.

"Yet, they were producing far fewer offspring than would be expected given their mating effort -- and fewer offspring than similarly ranked males that were younger."

Their conclusion: Age brings fertility or mortality issues.

"These findings provide evidence of post-copulatory reproductive senescence -- in other words, the sperm quality or quantity or infant survival may decline with age [of the male]," Milich said.

### **Who's your daddy?**

At Washington University, Milich leads the Reproductive Ecology and Behavioral Endocrinology Laboratory (REBEL). She and her research team members use ecological, behavioral, hormonal and genetic data to investigate certain long-held beliefs within the areas of sexual selection and sexual strategies.



This new research can help fill a number of important gaps in understanding reproductive success in primates, Milich said.

First, most research on aging and infertility in humans has focused on women.

In addition, while some studies on age-related changes to men's sperm have been conducted, they provide contradictory evidence. And cross-cultural variations make the issues of aging and reproductive success difficult to understand through human studies.

In other studies with different monkey species, declines in reproductive output for older males have been associated with a loss of dominance status, loss in attractiveness, and/or loss in body condition leading to a decline in mating activity.

But the older rhesus monkeys in this study maintained high rates of mating behaviors while still experiencing the same decline in reproductive output.

"In populations where individuals are successfully mating and producing offspring, researchers should not use behavioral observations of mating patterns to determine paternity," Milich said. "As we saw in this study, those data do not necessarily match with the genetic paternity data."

### **Conservation implications**

Future studies should continue to gather long-term data on variation in male reproductive health, and how social and physiological factors can impact a male's ability to sire offspring, said the study authors. Milich was joined by

Angelina Ruiz-Lambides and Elizabeth Maldonado of the University of Puerto Rico plus Dario Maestriperi of the University of Chicago.

"Unfortunately, we have reached a level of deforestation and habitat destruction that impairs successful reproduction within some populations of wild animals," Milich said.

"In efforts to try to understand why certain populations have not been successful at producing any infants for years, sometimes even over a decade, researchers should take into consideration not only the age and stressors to females, but also the age of males," she said.

## **SOCIO – CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

### **9. Neanderthals had the capacity to perceive and produce human speech**

Summary:

Neanderthals -- the closest ancestor to modern humans -- possessed the ability to perceive and produce human speech, according to a new study.

Neanderthals -- the closest ancestor to modern humans -- possessed the ability to perceive and produce human speech, according to a new study published by an international multidisciplinary team of researchers including Binghamton University Associate Professor of Anthropology Rolf Quam and graduate student Alex Velez.

"This is one of the most important studies I have been involved in during my career," said Quam. "The results are solid and clearly show the Neanderthals had the capacity to perceive and produce human speech. This is one of the very few current, ongoing research lines relying on fossil evidence to study the evolution of language, a notoriously tricky subject in anthropology."

The evolution of language, and the linguistic capacities in Neanderthals in particular, is a long-standing question in human evolution.

"For decades, one of the central questions in human evolutionary studies has been whether the human form of communication, spoken language, was also present in any other species of human ancestor, especially the Neanderthals," said coauthor Juan Luis Arsuaga, professor of paleontology at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and co-director of excavations and research at the Atapuerca archaeological sites in northern Spain. The latest study has reconstructed how Neanderthals heard to draw some inferences about how they may have communicated.

The study relied on high resolution CT scans to create virtual 3D models of the ear structures in *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals as well as earlier fossils from the site of Atapuerca that represent ancestors of the Neanderthals. Data collected on the 3D models were entered into a software-based model, developed in the field of auditory bioengineering, to estimate the hearing abilities up to 5 kHz, which encompasses most of the frequency range of modern

human speech sounds. Compared with the Atapuerca fossils, the Neanderthals showed slightly better hearing between 4-5 kHz, resembling modern humans more closely.

In addition, the researchers were able to calculate the frequency range of maximum sensitivity, technically known as the occupied bandwidth, in each species. The occupied bandwidth is related to the communication system, such that a wider bandwidth allows for a larger number of easily distinguishable acoustic signals to be used in the oral communication of a species. This, in turn, improves the efficiency of communication, the ability to deliver a clear message in the shortest amount of time. The Neanderthals show a wider bandwidth compared with their ancestors from Atapuerca, more closely resembling modern humans in this feature.

"This really is the key," said Mercedes Conde-Valverde, professor at the Universidad de Alcalá in Spain and lead author of the study. "The presence of similar hearing abilities, particularly the bandwidth, demonstrates that the Neanderthals possessed a communication system that was as complex and efficient as modern human speech."

"One of the other interesting results from the study was the suggestion that Neanderthal speech likely included an increased use of consonants," said Quam. "Most previous studies of Neanderthal speech capacities focused on their ability to produce the main vowels in English spoken language. However, we feel this emphasis is misplaced, since the use of consonants is a way to include more information in

the vocal signal and it also separates human speech and language from the communication patterns in nearly all other primates. The fact that our study picked up on this is a really interesting aspect of the research and is a novel suggestion regarding the linguistic capacities in our fossil ancestors."

Thus, Neanderthals had a similar capacity to us to produce the sounds of human speech, and their ear was "tuned" to perceive these frequencies. This change in the auditory capacities in Neanderthals, compared with their ancestors from Atapuerca, parallels archaeological evidence for increasingly complex behavioral patterns, including changes in stone tool technology, domestication of fire and possible symbolic practices. Along these lines, the study provides strong evidence in favor of the coevolution of increasingly complex behaviors and increasing efficiency in vocal communication throughout the course of human evolution.

The team behind the new study has been developing this research line for nearly two decades, and has ongoing collaborations to extend the analyses to additional fossil species. For the moment, however, the new results are exciting.

"These results are particularly gratifying," said Ignacio Martinez, a professor at Universidad de Alcalá in Spain. "We believe, after more than a century of research into this question, that we have provided a conclusive answer to the question of Neanderthal speech capacities."

The study, "Neandertals and modern humans had similar auditory and speech capacities," was published in *Nature Ecology and Evolution*.

## 10. Neanderthals and Homo sapiens used identical Nubian technology

Long held in a private collection, the newly analysed tooth of an approximately 9-year-old Neanderthal child marks the hominin's southernmost known range. Analysis of the associated archaeological assemblage suggests Neanderthals used Nubian Levallois technology, previously thought to be restricted to Homo sapiens.

With a high concentration of cave sites harbouring evidence of past populations and their behaviour, the Levant is a major centre for human origins research. For over a century, archaeological excavations in the Levant have produced human fossils and stone tool assemblages that reveal landscapes inhabited by both Neanderthals and Homo sapiens, making this region a potential mixing ground between populations. Distinguishing these populations by stone tool assemblages alone is difficult, but one technology, the distinct Nubian Levallois method, is argued to have been produced only by Homo sapiens.

In a new study published in *Scientific Reports*, researchers from the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History teamed up with international partners to re-examine the fossil and archaeological record of Shukbah Cave. Their findings extend the southernmost known range of Neanderthals and suggest that our now-extinct relatives

made use of a technology previously argued to be a trademark of modern humans. This study marks the first time the lone human tooth from the site has been studied in detail, in combination with a major comparative study examining the stone tool assemblage.

"Sites where hominin fossils are directly associated with stone tool assemblages remain a rarity - but the study of both fossils and tools is critical for understanding hominin occupations of Shukbah Cave and the larger region," says lead author Dr Jimbob Blinkhorn, formerly of Royal Holloway, University of London and now with the Pan-African Evolution Research Group (Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History).

Shukbah Cave was first excavated in the spring of 1928 by Dorothy Garrod, who reported a rich assemblage of animal bones and Mousterian-style stone tools cemented in breccia deposits, often concentrated in well-marked hearths. She also identified a large, unique human molar. However, the specimen was kept in a private collection for most of the 20th century, prohibiting comparative studies using modern methods. The recent re-identification of the tooth at the Natural History Museum in London has led to new detailed work on the Shukbah collections.

"Professor Garrod immediately saw how distinctive this tooth was. We've examined the size, shape and both the external and internal 3D structure of the tooth, and compared that to Holocene and Pleistocene Homo sapiens and Neanderthal specimens. This has enabled us to clearly characterise the

tooth as belonging to an approximately 9 year old Neanderthal child," says Dr. Clément Zanolli, from Université de Bordeaux. "Shukbah marks the southernmost extent of the Neanderthal range known to date," adds Zanolli.

Although Homo sapiens and Neanderthals shared the use of a wide suite of stone tool technologies, Nubian Levallois technology has recently been argued to have been exclusively used by Homo sapiens. The argument has been made particularly in southwest Asia, where Nubian Levallois tools have been used to track human dispersals in the absence of fossils.

"Illustrations of the stone tool collections from Shukbah hinted at the presence of Nubian Levallois technology so we revisited the collections to investigate further. In the end, we identified many more artefacts produced using the Nubian Levallois methods than we had anticipated," says Blinkhorn. "This is the first time they've been found in direct association with Neanderthal fossils, which suggests we can't make a simple link between this technology and Homo sapiens."

"Southwest Asia is a dynamic region in terms of hominin demography, behaviour and environmental change, and may be particularly important to examine interactions between Neanderthals and Homo sapiens," adds Prof Simon Blockley, of Royal Holloway, University of London. "This study highlights the geographic range of Neanderthal populations and their behavioural flexibility, but also issues a timely note of caution that there are no straightforward links between particular hominins and specific stone tool technologies."



"Up to now we have no direct evidence of a Neanderthal presence in Africa," said Prof Chris Stringer of the Natural History Museum. "But the southerly location of Shukbah, only about 400 km from Cairo, should remind us that they may have even dispersed into Africa at times."

## INDIAN & TRIBAL ANTHROPOLOGY

### 1. Tigers and tribals: Conservation project displaced 18,493 families in 48 yrs



The displacements happened from critical tiger habitats,

according to RTI response accessed by DTE A total 18,493 families in 215 villages across Protected Areas (PA) in India have been displaced in the 48 years since the inception of Project Tiger, the Union government's flagship scheme for tiger conservation. The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change shared the information in response to a query filed under the Right to Information (RTI) Act and accessed by Down to Earth. PAs comprise wildlife sanctuaries, national parks and conservation reserves.

The displacements, according to the RTI response, happened from the core areas (also known as critical tiger habitats) created under the Wildlife Protection Act (WLPA), 1972. The population of tigers in the country plummeted by the second half of the 20th century due to an increase in unrestricted killings following the declaration of the species as vermin, hunting and habitat loss. This loss in population led to the creation of the First Tiger Task Force in 1972. At the end of the 19th century, there were around 40,000 tigers in India, which came down to 1,900 by the time the task force started work, according to the committee's report submitted to the central government in August 1972. In its recommendations, the task force talked about the creation of "inviolable spaces", which are areas of wilderness undisturbed by humans (mostly forest dwellers). Although the WLPA created the legal framework for settling rights in PAs, there was no legislative or policy framework to govern resettlement from core areas of national parks.

The mechanism, however, was set in place only in the 2006

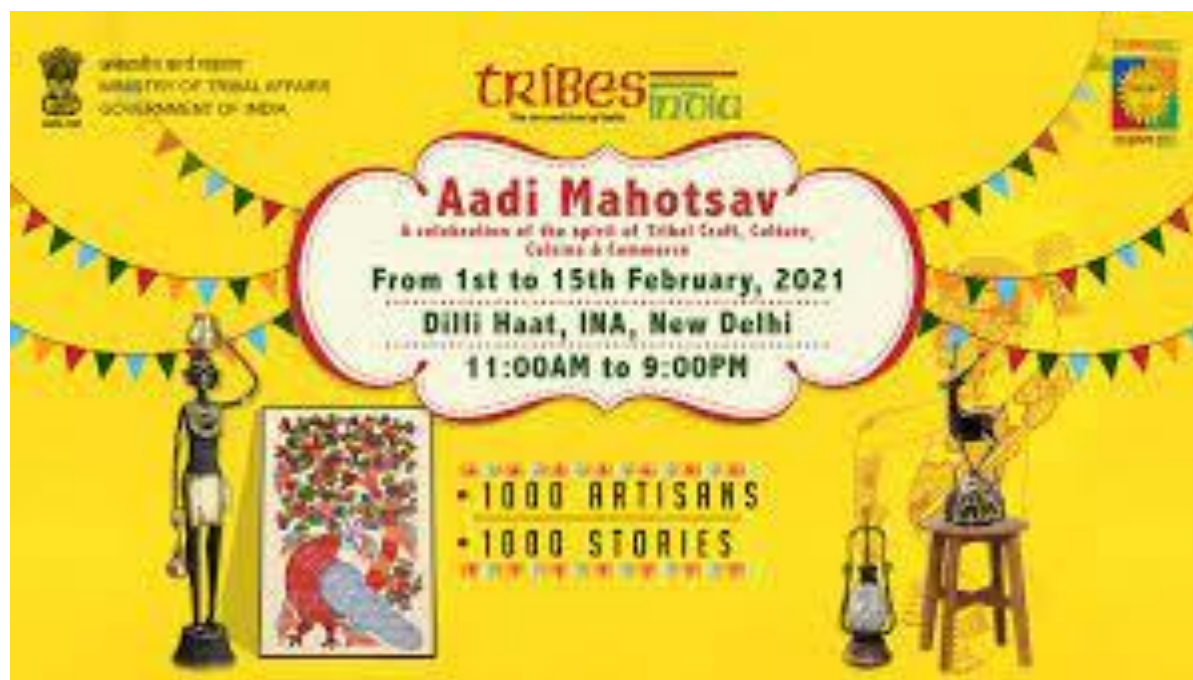
amendment of the WLPA – on the basis of the Second Tiger Task Force report of 2005. The amendment, for the first time, brought the idea of “voluntary relocation” within the purview of law. Experts, however, labelled the data for the number of displacements that took place between 1972 and 2006 shoddy, for there was no mechanism to oversee the displacement process.

### **Displacement history**

Displacements from the PAs increased manifold after the 2006 amendment. This was partly because the state authorities blamed forest-dwelling communities for the local extinction of tiger population in Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan in 2003-04. Till 2005, 2,900 families from 80 villages had been displaced, according to the Second Tiger Task Force Report. Between 2005 and 2020, 135 villages with 15,593 families were displaced. Conflict between the villages in the forest and the state are brewing everywhere – from Rajaji Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand to Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu. A recent study by Pune-based non-profit Kalpavrikah, in collaboration with Environment Justice (EJ) Atlas, mapped out these conflicts in 26 PAs across the country. Between 2005 and 2020, the budgetary allocations to the Project Tiger increased by 1,150 per cent: To Rs 350 crore in 2019-20 from Rs 28 crore in 2006-07. Project Tiger finances tiger reserves, including relocation projects. The major jump in the budgetary allocation, however, had happened in 2009-10, immediately after the local extension in Panna Tiger Reserve in 2009: The amount shot to Rs 150 crore in 2009-10 from Rs

28 crore in 2008-09. While the allocations increased manifold, the compensation amount for relocation only marginally increased from to Rs 10 lakh in 2006 from Rs 1 lakh in 1986. Currently, there are still 496 villages with a population of 41,086 forest-dwellers across India's critical tiger habitats, according to the RTI response.

## 2. Vice President to Inaugurate National Tribal Festival "Aadi Mahotsav" at Dilli Haat, INA, New Delhi



The Vice President of India Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu will inaugurate "Aadi Mahotsav", a National Tribal Festival being organized by TRIFED, Ministry of Tribal Affairs at 6.30 PM on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2021 (Monday) at Dilli Haat, INA, New Delhi. Union Minister for Tribal Affairs Shri Arjun Munda will preside over the inaugural function. Minister of State for Tribal Affairs Smt Renuka Singh and Chairman, TRIFED Shri Ramesh Chand Meena, and Secretary, Ministry of Tribal

Affairs Shri R. Subrahmanyam will be the guests of honour for the inaugural function. The Aadi Mahotsav is being organized from February 1-15, 2021.

The Aadi Mahotsav - A Celebration of the Spirit of Tribal Culture, Crafts, Cuisine and Commerce - is a successful annual initiative that was commenced in 2017. The festival was an attempt to familiarise the people with the rich and diverse craft, culture of the tribal communities across the country, in one place.

Due to the unprecedented circumstances caused due to the pandemic, TRIFED did not hold any Aadi Mahotsav in 2020 however, the tradition has now been resumed. The National Tribal Festival at Dilli Haat will comprise display and sale of tribal art and craft, medicine & healers, cuisine and folk performances, in which around 1000 tribal artisans, artists and chefs from more than 20 States of the country shall participate and provide a glimpse of their rich traditional culture.

Tribes constitute over 8% of our population however, they are among the disadvantaged sections of the society. Characterised by natural simplicity, their creations have a timeless appeal. The wide range of handicrafts which include hand-woven cotton, silk fabrics, wool, metal craft, terracotta, bead-work, all need to be preserved and promoted. TRIFED, as the nodal agency under Ministry of Tribal Affairs, has been working to improve the income and livelihoods of the tribal people, while preserving their way of life and traditions.

### **3. This Former IIT Prof Once Taught RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan. Today He's Helping Tribals in MP.**

If you happen to be in the densely vegetated area of Betul and Hoshangabad in Madhya Pradesh, you are likely to stumble upon an unassuming old man with a scraggly white beard, quietly making his way through the wilderness on his cycle.

He goes by the name Alok Sagar and was once a resident of New Delhi. For the last 34 years however, this man has been working untiringly for the betterment of tribals in Madhya Pradesh.

**Sagar has singlehandedly planted more than 50,000 trees in Betul district. The eco-conscious citizen also spreads his message of a greener world by collecting and distributing seeds among tribals, at a reasonable rate.**





His work with the Shramik Adiwasi Sangathan has also seen him take on the role of an activist who works towards securing the rights of tribals in the area.

Yet, what makes his selfless efforts more noteworthy is the fact that Sagar left a lucrative career as an IIT Delhi professor to serve the people.

Sagar is an alumnus of IIT Delhi himself, with a Bachelor in Electrical Engineering as well as a Masters from the reputed institute. He then went on to pursue his PhD at Houston University in Texas, US.

Upon returning to India, Sagar joined his alma mater as a professor and even went on to teach current RBI Governor, Raghuram Rajan.

By 1982 however, Sagar felt that he could contribute more to the development of the country by working with people on the ground. He resigned from his well-paying job and took off towards Betul and Hoshangabad.

For 34 years, his neighbours and the tribals he worked with had been completely in the dark about Sagar's past as a renowned academic at a prestigious institution. It was only during the assembly elections in the district when, unable to verify his background, the Betul district administration asked him to leave. This was when Sagar revealed his true identity.

Anurag Modi, who works with Sagar, told The Hindustan Times, "Unlike the baseless fight over degrees of politicians, Sagar has set an example of being a true social worker."

“In India, people are facing so many problems, but people are busy proving their intelligence by showing their degrees rather than serving people,” Sagar added.

True social work, they say, is done quietly and away from the spotlight. Sagar is the epitome of this sentiment.

#### **4. Cultural artillery, Christianity, education: How the British & missionaries Westernised Khasis**



In 'White As Milk and Rice', Nidhi Dugar Kundalia writes about how 80% of Khasis today are Christian converts



because of the British. The Khasi males always used the phrase leit khwai or 'to go fishing' when trying to court young girls. In this phawar, the word dohkha (fish) refers to young and naive Khasi girls who are at the very heart of the matrilineal system. Like the fish of Ward's Lake, a man-made water body commissioned by the British officer Ward, the girls can be easily lured and swept away by the false promises of love. The word 'uncle' here implies any non-tribal male. 'Stay away from the men of the plains and the British who'll ultimately leave us for the women of their own community,' their grandmother would tell the girls. And then squeezing her eyes shut, she'd pray into some rice and keep it in their pockets before they left home the next day.

'May He keep you away from all troubles,' she'd tell them at the door. Back then, the East India Company seemed to have considered it their duty to 'redeem' the hill people of Khasi and Garo Hills who followed their traditional animistic religion. The British dubbed them 'noble savages' and tried to confer upon them 'the blessings of the civilization' through Christianity. Evangelization among the Khasis was started in the early 1800s by Christian missionaries long before the occupation of the hills by the British government. Thomas Jones, the founder of the missions, was given the job of spreading education in the hills, but the biggest objective was to preach Christianity. Opposition to the schools by the locals commenced when young pupils refused to join animal sacrifices, venerating family spirits and eating raw meat, as was the custom of Khasis in those days. They cut their long hair, and covered their bodies. By 1864, the government

assumed almost entirely the financial burden of educating the tribes. The Khasi women were eager to learn since the matrilineal system placed a heavy responsibility on women: the raising of their children. Within the next two years, the schools in the hills rose to seventy, with about 1316 pupils.

Along with literature, medical missionaries also helped in the rapid progress of evangelization. Khasis were often victims of regular outbreaks of diseases such as cholera and small pox. Before the British, the tribesmen resorted to sacrifices to the spirits as remedial measures, which of course failed invariably and as a result, the members of the Lyngdoh clan, who propagated these sacrifices as medicine men, were soon discredited. The devastation caused by cholera was often so severe that the men finally succumbed to foreign medicines and vaccinations and soon, the mission gained a great deal of popularity. By the 1870s, people gradually ceased to regard Christian conversion as a sang, or taboo. The number of converts swelled to 514 by 1971. Today, about 80 per cent of Khasis are Christian converts. Grandmother knew about the literature, medical missions and hygiene consciousness that the English brought to the hills, but for her, all this was a pointless prelude to the real story – the deviation of the people from their traditional reputation of simplicity and truthfulness. They ceased to regard their sacred groves and pools, traditional dances and festivals. The dead were buried instead of being cremated and the ancient mawbynas, or the memorial stones erected by people for their ancestors, were flattened; in their place came homes, markets and churches.

When the colonizers stopped growing with convoy and the guns to impose their will, they brought out their cultural artillery – dances at Shillong Club, Golf Club, Pine Wood and Western movies at Kelvin and Garrison cinema halls. Young boys and girls swooned to Dame Vera Lynn, fondly known as the ‘Forces’ Sweetheart’, when she came to Shillong for a concert – the crowds loved it. But throw in traditional instruments like a tangmuri or a duitara, the crowd’s noise would drown them out. As a quick remedial measure, the Seng Khasi elders pushed their young to dance at Weiking Grounds for the Shad Shuk Mynsiem festival, not only celebrating the arrival of spring and the sowing of seeds, but also reinstating faith in the Khasi philosophy of the matrilineal system. Men, both married and unmarried, danced with their swords and whips, donning the role of protectors of maidens. Only unmarried and virgin women, as a rule, were allowed to dance and they shuffled in the inner circles: bare-footed, moving forward or backward with their eyes cast downwards. Each year, Wansuk and Syrpai would dress in traditional family heirlooms of rupa, sai khyllong and pansgiant along with a lasubon, a silver attachment with flowers for their hair, and dance at the Weiking Ground. The silver crown on the virgin maiden’s head was to honour the position of the woman in the society, a keeper of not only her honour, but the entire Khasi race. The girls danced their hearts out, Wansuk especially. One watcher in the crowd told another, ‘Did you see that girl dancing? So fluid!’ And she’d wish dreadfully that her grandmother had been there. The remarkable thing was that even if she was there, she did not hear. Even if she did hear it, she’d pretend she didn’t

comprehend. Others learnt not to praise the girls, lest they spoil them. Even other people liked to please her grandmother.

### **5. Forest Rights Act is quite clear on genuine forest dwellers, but states are letting it down**



India cannot save her forests, but for the active involvement of the forest dwelling scheduled tribes. The Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006 as well as the Rules, 2007, are quite clear and unambiguous on the right of habitation and other forest rights. But the problem begins when it comes to the implementation of the law by the states. To blame the Supreme Court's recent judgment for the probable eviction of over one million tribal people – as the media and others are doing – is wrong and

it is perhaps due to misrepresentation of both law and fact. The law as it stands automatically vests rights of residence/habitation to genuine forest right holders especially scheduled tribes. The rejection, if at all, largely relates to extent of cultivation. The court directed the states to evict people who were not able to establish their claims as forest dwellers under the Forest Rights Act. The law or the order isn't the problem here, the states are. By making the burden of proof so heavy, the states have risked the eviction of genuine forest dwellers.

### **The right to habitation**

While the framework of the Forest Rights Act was rather simple, too many complicated procedures and forms were introduced through state clarifications and office directions. The law, as it stands, automatically recognised and vested the forest rights to the 'forest dwelling schedule tribes as well as other traditional forest dwellers'. It gave them two basic rights: habitation and self-cultivation, something they enjoyed before the law was passed as well. The law also makes a distinction between forest rights for scheduled tribes and forest rights for dwellers other than scheduled tribes in terms of their eligibility. The right to habitation has been automatically vested in the act, provided the scheduled tribe family proves that they existed on that location before 13 December 2005 and were cultivating on an extent piece of forest land. Any genuine tribal family residing in that area would not have any problem in proving that. It would be more difficult for 'other traditional forest dwellers' because

they have to prove that they were residents of that area for three generations – generations being 25 years each. However, when it came to the verification, the states introduced complex processes for both.

### **Genuine forest dwellers**

Verifying the extent of cultivation on such forest land and habitation would have to be done through a three-level scrutiny process by the gram sabha, the sub-division level committee and the district level committee. It was supposed to be facilitated by a forest rights committee, a subset of the gram sabha, with the technical help of other related departments including the forest, tribal, revenue and the Panchayats. It is no body's case that fresh encroachments should be regularised in a forest area. But for the states to make the process so complicated for scheduled tribes who existed as on 13 December 2005, which can be proved quite easily through a large menu of evidence envisaged under the Rule 14 of the Forest Rights Rules, is unfair. It risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The Supreme Court needs to caution the states and dig a little deeper to understand the complexity of this historic legislation on at least two counts. First, questioning the number of rejections that have been produced by the states and whether there is solid evidence to that effect or not. Often in a target-oriented and scheme-oriented country, numbers play a huge role. The god is in the details, and so is the devil. Second, probing the number of appeals that are pending on both bogus claims as well as genuine claims at the appellate authorities under the Forest

Rights Act. It is necessary that a powerful and equipped monitoring body is established as a special purpose vehicle under the aegis of the Supreme Court itself since the states have failed in doing so. This role was supposed to be performed by the state level monitoring committees, which are by and large defunct and dysfunctional, and clearly not doing its statutory duty.

### **Treading cautiously**

It must be understood that a rejection of claim to a forest right over cultivation of an extent piece of forest land, or rejection due to technicalities of the form itself, or wrong interpretation by the sub-division level committee or the district level committee, or a non-proactive state-level monitoring committee should not lead to genuine tribal families being deprived of their rightful homes as guaranteed by the act. Because that would perhaps lead to another big 'historical injustice' that we won't be able to amend. So, the judiciary, the states and the petitioners must tread cautiously because India won't be able to save her forests without the active involvement of the forest dwelling scheduled tribes. An appeal to the PM Narendra Modi government is that let it remain the forest rights act and not a forest frights act.

## **6. Why India's local health traditions need to be formalised**





Traditional healers need to be brought into the public health systems as they function in a resource-strained ecology. A few months ago, Tony, a colleague of mine in Gudalur – a small tribal town in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris district complained of mouth ulcers. He whined about black circles, lack of sleep and loss of appetite. Maadhan, another colleague from the local Adivasi community, advised him to eat the tender fruits of manathakkali (*Solanum nigrum*), a wild herb. Tony ate the ripe fruits diligently for two to three days and the ulcers eventually disappeared. Normally, as a biomedically trained dentist, I would have prescribed an anaesthetic ointment and vitamin supplements. I did not realise the cure for the ulcers was right in the garden attached to my workplace. Tony's ulcers happened at a time when I was enquiring, as a part of a



research project, about the legitimacy of the Local Health Tradition (LHT) practices among Siddha vaidyars (healers) and Adivasi healers in Tamil Nadu. The study aimed to understand “LHT’s revitalisation”.

A few months ago, Tony, a colleague of mine in Gudalur – a small tribal town in Tamil Nadu’s Nilgiris district complained of mouth ulcers. He whined about black circles, lack of sleep and loss of appetite. Maadhan, another colleague from the local Adivasi community, advised him to eat the tender fruits of manathakkali (*Solanum nigrum*), a wild herb. Tony ate the ripe fruits diligently for two to three days and the ulcers eventually disappeared. Normally, as a biomedically trained dentist, I would have prescribed an anaesthetic ointment and vitamin supplements. I did not realise the cure for the ulcers was right in the garden attached to my workplace. Tony’s ulcers happened at a time when I was enquiring, as a part of a research project, about the legitimacy of the Local Health Tradition (LHT) practices among Siddha vaidyars (healers) and Adivasi healers in Tamil Nadu. The study aimed to understand “LHT’s revitalisation”. In Tony’s case, the herbal treatment received was primary and affordable healthcare. There is community support for LHT in Gudalur, which perhaps, has kept this tradition alive, as must be the case in many other parts of India. In Tamil Nadu, LHT is practised by pacchamarundhu vaidyars (“green” or herbal medicine healer) among the Adivasis, and by paramparika Siddha vaidyars (traditional Siddha practitioners) elsewhere. For both types of healers, knowledge has been passed from one generation to another: healer families protect it as their

intellectual property. In many places, I found that paramparika vaidyars enjoy a special social status entirely attributed to their 'power of healing' which gives them traditional legitimacy.

Analysing Tony's experience, besides other related research and interviews with healers, intricate nuances of the LHT practice came to the fore. Earlier last year, an Adivasi community worker accompanied me to the residence of an elderly healer in a remote tribal hamlet near Gudalur. He noted that 'many people here, mostly tribals, still go to healers'. He also observed that the older the healer, the larger his/her patient following. The healers represent a parampara or tradition. According to a healer from Vellore, several Siddha traditions trace their origins to the wandering mendicants who passed it to the family of the Siddha vaidyars centuries ago. The traditional legitimacy which the lineage offers reinforces the thought that the older the practitioner, the richer the knowledge, and thus, the stronger the following. Parampara denotes a succession of teachers and disciples in traditional Indian culture. It is the tradition of relationship and mentoring where teachings are passed on from a teacher to the student. The knowledge transfer and training is rigorous and starts as early as four years in the case of Siddha vaidya. The knowledge is transferred orally with emphasis on observation. Siddha vaidyars spend the early years as apprentices until they are ready, as opposed to a Siddha doctor who earns a Bachelor of Siddha Medicine and Surgery after five years of college education.

The parampara is held in high regard and enjoys immense community support. Healers typically do not demand monetary compensation for consultation – they accept whatever is given to them. Sometimes, clothes and fruits are given by a recuperated patient, or payment is made for the preparation of medicines. Healers don't get monetary gains from healing – an important distinction from quacks. For tribals, an Adivasi healer who is a member of their community will often enjoy greater acceptance than a western biomedicine-trained doctor. They are socially relevant in rural society and are the immediate point of contact, forming the fundamental part of primary healthcare. A successfully-treated patient refers the healer to more of his/her peers, as I learned from an elderly non-tribal healer in Gudalur who treated patients in far-off towns and cities. Healers are sympathetic to patients' emotions. There is an unexplained vishwasam (faith) in the healers among patients. The healers are service oriented and see the healing as a punyam (virtuous deed).

But there are contrasts between the practices of Adivasi healers and Siddha vaidyars – training, nature of practice and even clientele vary substantially. Adivasi healers do not see registration as a great deal, but it concerns the Siddha vaidyars. Siddha vaidyars' main occupation is healing, whereas Adivasi healers do it in an ad hoc manner. Further, Adivasi healers are rarely antagonistic towards hospital care. As one elderly Adivasi healer mentioned, "No one went to the hospital. It was all in the house, whatever happened. If nothing could be done, then we used to go to the hospital."

Integration is practised at the community level and encouraged by these healers, even though it may be neglected or dissuaded in official policy. In contrast, Siddha vaidyars often emphasise the inadequacies of western medicine and even codified systems like the Siddha degree.

Notwithstanding these differences, all healers acknowledge the distinct nature of their practice. As anthropologist Helen Lambert says, based on her work on haad vaidis (traditional bone doctors), many LHT are experience based, where training is based on practice and observation rather than textbook or school learning. Haad vaidis like pacchamarundhu and parramparika Siddha vaidyars are primary healthcare providers. They have been part of the public health system across the country, yet they operate on the margins as a subaltern practice because of regulations by the Indian medical boards. This is primarily due to state neglect of LHT and increased investments in western biomedicine.

**What does this mean for legitimacy?** For the state, legitimacy is derived from certification from institutionalised training and standardised practices. So LHT is outside the strict legitimacy boundary for the state. But healers respond to the demands of legal-rational authority legitimacy from various angles. Our research suggests that the stronger a health tradition's legitimacy, the greater the confidence in practice. In this scenario, some healers don't seem to see the necessity for legal-rational authority. Others see its potential role in complementing the existing practice which has traditional legitimacy. As a Chennai healer put it: <sup>a</sup>If registration was

there I could have practised it on a bigger scale. You can't drive a vehicle without a licence," he says. Yet another healer didn't seem to care about registration; he attributed his legitimacy to the success of his treatment evidenced by patients' referral.

For the traditional healers in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, legitimacy has come from myriad sources: the authenticity of the knowledge system they possess, allegiance to a larger organisation (like Tamil Nadu Paramparika Siddha Vaidya Sangam), and favourable results of treatment, which got them a loyal following. So most of the traditional healers have traditional legitimacy where the authority is legitimated by the sanctity of the tradition. However, the compulsory state professionalisation of medicine has pushed LHTs on the margins. Those belonging to this marginal space practise esoterically. There is an urgent need to formalise LHTS within the health system. LHTS are locally relevant and appropriate in a resource-strained system providing remedies within the vicinity just as seen in Tony's case. The conversion of these details into a policy prescription is challenging because of the fluid nature of the traditions. The current slogan of policy documents on revitalisation of LHTS need to take these traditions' vibrant nature into account and not literal impositions of standards and practices alien to such traditions.

**7. As cities adjust to new normal, tribal children suffer from lack of devices, connectivity**



New Delhi: While urban India is trying to adjust to the new normal triggered by Covid-19, the Centre is struggling with mobile and internet connectivity issues to impart education to children from tribal areas and other socially and economically backward classes. With Lockdown 1 on March 23, India had closed its schools and educational institutions.

With Covid-19 cases increasing, schools continue to remain closed. However, the government is worried that children hailing from remote vilespecially belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, will be worst-hit. Many tribal students live and get formal education at the centrally-funded Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS). However, with successive lockdowns, these schools are closed. As per the

tribal affairs ministry data, there are 285 EMRS which have 73,391 tribal students (including 36,824 boys and 36,567 girls). The Centre has tried to hold online classes. However, the students do not have devices and hail from remote villages with weak mobile network and connectivity issues. A tribal affairs ministry spokesperson told ET, “The newly created National Educational Society for Tribal Students (NESTS), a central society for running EMRS, had been closely following the students’ educational progress.

Although there are various challenges reported from the field such as network and connectivity problems and lack of devices, the students and teachers are paving their way through structural challenges in the best possible manner. Schools are witnessing a blend of offline and online modes of learning.” The ministry does not have any data on how many children log in for classes or if these are regularly conducted. When asked how many schools have been conducting classes, the spokesperson said, “Almost all schools are working towards the educational progress of maximum children.” The ministry had worked out a plan thinking schools will be allowed to reopen from September 1.

However, with the unlock guidelines not allowing schools, the plan has been postponed. Secretary (tribal affairs) Deepak Khandekar told ET, “Once schools reopen, we would have to make concerted efforts to bring these children back to our schools. We have tried our best to run online classes and keep them abreast with some form of school education. But there would be an obvious learning gap.”



## 8. M/O Tribal Affairs Intends to Establish National Tribal Research Institute (NTRI) at Delhi



Ministry of Tribal Affairs intends to establish a National Tribal Research Institute (NTRI) at Delhi to act as body of knowledge & research and as a think tank for tribal development. However, no proposal for collaboration with NGOs is under consideration of the Ministry. The NTRI envisages to serve the purpose of mentoring and hand holding support to Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs) located in various States, and to ensure quality and uniformity in research works, evaluation studies, training, awareness generation among tribals, showcasing of rich tribal heritage including languages, habitats and cultivation and production practices such as cloth weaving etc. NTRI may also house auditorium for national level conferences.



Social Security Scheme for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups Ministry of Tribal Affairs is likely to make a Social Security Scheme for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG). It is also administering the scheme of 'Mechanism for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through Minimum Support Price (MSP) and Development of Value Chain for MFP' under which it is ensured that the gatherers of Minor Forest Produce, most of whom belong to Scheduled Tribes, get fair returns for their efforts in collection of the notified forest produce. Further, Government has introduced the Van DhanVikasKaryakram under this scheme to improve the skills of the MFP gatherers in sustainable cultivation of MFPs, their Value Addition, providing necessary tools and facilities, etc.

which will further improve the returns to the beneficiaries. MSP for MFP Scheme has Successfully Strengthened Tribal Economy; Infusing more than Rs 3000 Crore in the Past Few Months! One bright spot in this turbulent and challenging year has been therecord procurement of MFPs under the MSP for MFP Scheme in 16 states which has now touchedRs. 148.12 crores. This is the highest-ever in terms of the number of MFPs, the total value of procurement and the number of states involved, since the implementation of the scheme. With this, the total procurement for the year (both Government and private trade) crossed more than Rs3000 crores, proving to be a much needed panacea in these distressing times of the Covid-19 pandemic which has disrupted lives and livelihoods of tribal people. Over the last few months since April 2020, with the Government push and the Van Dhan scheme

proving to be a catalyst and active participation from the States, the Guidelines for the Scheme for 'Mechanism for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through Minimum Support Price (MSP) & Development of Value Chain for MFP' initiated to provide MSP to gatherers of forest produce and introducing value addition and marketing through tribal groups and clusters has taken firm roots across the country and found widespread acceptance. Among the States, Chhattisgarh has taken the lead by procuring 46,857 Metric tonnes of Minor Forest Produces worth a whopping Rs 106.53 crores.

Odisha and Gujarat follow with a procurement of 14391.23 MTs of MFPs worth Rs 30.41 crores and 772.97 MTs of MFPs worth Rs 3.41 crores respectively. Chhattisgarh has 866 procurement centres and the State has leveraged its vast network of Van Dhan SHGs from the 139 Van Dhan Kendras effectively as well. Innovations adopted such as door-to-door collection of minor forest produces by mobile units comprising of forest, revenue and VDVK officials have contributed to these high procurement values. The unprecedented circumstances caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic threw up challenges and resulted in a severe crisis among the tribal population. Unemployment among youth, reverse migration of tribals threatened to throw the entire tribal economy off track. It is in such a scenario that the MSP for MFP presented an opportunity to all the States.

The successful implementation of the Van Dhan Yojana across

the 22 States involving 3.6 lakh tribal beneficiaries and continuous engagement & on-boarding of the States by TRIFED has invariably acted as a catalyst for putting the MSP for MFP Scheme on the right track. In addition, government intervention and procurement provided the required boost. With an intention to revive the sagging tribal economy, a revised set of MSP for MFP guidelines were issued on May 1 2020, which increased the MSP prices of the MFPs by up to 90% and thus helped in ensuring higher incomes for the tribal gatherers. On May 26, 2020, the Ministry also recommended the addition of 23 new items under the MSP for MFP list. These items include agricultural and horticultural produce collected by tribal gatherers.

TRIFED, as the nodal agency working to empower the tribal population, has been supporting and assisting the State in all their efforts during this crisis. With Government of India and State agencies accounting for over Rs 1000 crores at MSP, the private trade has procured over Rs 2000 crores above MSP. With the injection of over Rs 3000 crores in the tribal economy, the MSP for MFP Scheme has been instrumental in accelerating the transformation of the tribal ecosystem and empowering the people. With systems and processes getting firmly established across the country, the quantum of procurement will definitely increase.

## **9. Action on ground needed to tackle malnutrition: Experts on India's poor showing at Global Hunger Index**



A look at the last round of NFHS in 2015-2016 corroborates this as it shows that the country's showing on parameters of 'wasted' and 'severely wasted' children had worsened. NEW DELHI: The recently released Global Hunger Index (GHI), which ranked India on the 94th spot among 107 countries, underlines that India's commitment to eliminating hunger and malnutrition leaves much to be desired. A look at the last round of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in 2015-2016 corroborates this as it shows that the country's showing on parameters of 'wasted' and 'severely wasted' children had worsened compared to the previous survey in 2005-06. NFHS-4 was conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, as designated by the Ministry of Health and Family.

As compared to NFHS-3, the percentage of wasted children under five years of age had increased from 19.8% to 21% in NFHS-4 (See GFX-1). The percentage of children under five who were 'severely wasted' increased from 6.4% in NFHS-3

to 7.5% in NFHS-4. This was corroborated in the GHI report which said that among the 11 countries where the public health significance of child wasting rate was considered 'high' or 'very high', India was in the latter category at 17.3 per cent. This paints a dismal picture of India's commitment to eliminating hunger and malnutrition as a part of achieving its sustainable development goals (SDGs), said activists working on food security. Deepa Bajaj, chief executive of the NGO Child Survival India, said budgetary allocation was an essential component of pushing the SDG agenda. The government has allocated Rs 35,600 crore for nutrition-related programmes in 2020-21 but action on the ground is needed, she said.

“It is essential for policymakers to realise that ‘hunger’ can be handled even by providing carbohydrate rich staple diets, but ‘nutrition’ needs proper balance of macro- and micro-nutrients in the diet and a multi-sectoral approach targeting women empowerment and education, tackling poverty and providing sanitation for all,” said Bajaj. Sachin Kumar Jain, a representative of Right to Food Campaign, said the SDGs remain restricted to academic discourse with states not adopting target-based approach in planning. “India’s malnutrition management campaign is just focused on technical aspects and not on ensuring the rightful access of women and children to food and nutrition,” said Jain. States where the percentage of under-five children who were stunted – an indicator of malnutrition – was significantly higher than the national average were Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Meghalaya (See GFX-2).

Bihar, Jharkhand, MP and UP also fared poorer than the already critical national average (35.8%) of children under-five who are underweight. The state-specific indicators on all forms of malnutrition like stunting, wasting and underweight influence the aggregated data at national level, observed Arvind Singh, advisor, health and nutrition, at the NGO Matri Sudha.

“Governments in high-burden states like Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, MP and Maharashtra must collaborate on various common parameters to address the issue.” Malnutrition can be controlled not only by intake of food but also by ensuring that infections like diarrhoea are prevented or treated at an early stage, pointed out Dr Abhay Bang, social activist and founder-director of Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health. Tribal areas & malnutrition States with significant tribal population like MP, Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh fared poorly in terms of stunting, wasting, severely wasting and children being underweight. With 40.6% of the Scheduled Tribe population living below the poverty line as compared to 20.5% of the non-tribal population, as documented by the 2011 Census data, malnutrition is worse among tribal children. Data shows 42% tribal children were underweight while under-five mortality rate among the ST population was 57.2 per 1,000 live births. “Food diversity which tribal people had when they had access to forests has now been jeopardised. Plus, not enough money is being spent on tribal health,” said Bhang, who led the expert committee which brought out a report on tribal health 2018.

## 10. G. Lavanam: Fighting for Independence as a Boy and Uplifting Tribals as a Man!



The late Mr Lavanam was honoured with the Jamnalal Bajaj Award in the category of 'Constructive Work'.

Mr Lavanam was a dynamic social activist. The son of Mrs Gora, who was an atheist and received Gandhiji's recognition and respect, he was born to Brahmin parentage but married Hemalata, a Dalit girl, at a time when untouchability was highly prevalent. He did not seek a bread-winning job and accepted voluntary poverty along with his parents. Hemlata was also actively involved in the welfare of women and has established and managed schools for underprivileged girls.



**In the year 2009, the late Mr Lavanam was honoured with the Jamnalal Bajaj Award in the category of 'Constructive Work'.**

Mr Lavanam was interested in social work since he was 12. His earliest work was as a young volunteer in the Independence movement, when he acted as a courier, clandestinely passing messages to leaders.

Subsequently, he was in Mahatma Gandhiji's Ashram in Sevagram where he received basic training in Gandhian Philosophy of social work. He later worked with his father – who would conduct night classes in Dalit colonies and also organise social events where “untouchables” and upper caste people dined together. He imbibed the spirit of this kind of Gandhian activism from his father.

When Vinayak Narahari “Vinoba” Bhave undertook his Padayatra for *Bhoodan* and *Gramdan* in Andhra Pradesh and the tribal tracts of Koraput district in Orissa, Mr Lavanam joined him and became the official interpreter for Vinobaji's speeches.

He was with Vinobaji, and later with Jayaprakash Narayan during the historic surrender of dacoits in Chambal Valley and elsewhere.

**Mr Lavanam extended the legacy of Vinobaji and began his work with tribes termed “criminal” in Andhra Pradesh.**

The Yerukala tribe was declared as a 'criminal tribe' by the British Government. They indulged in crimes ranging from



petty pilfering to large-scale stealing and robbery. The residents of the area were under constant threat. Lavanam decided to approach the tribe and tried to change the status quo.

The reforms and rehabilitation were carried out in five stages. In the first stage, Mr Lavanam and his team took the tribals in confidence and began counselling. They were a total of about 350 families. This was a period of suspicion and stiff resistance.

The second stage was a period of gaining the confidence of the criminal tribals and organising linkages with concerned government departments. Through persuasion of Mr Lavanam and his team, the tribes slowly surrendered to legal authorities.

**He was also able to bring about an attitudinal change among them. At the same time, he made the Government take a positive approach.**

In the third stage, the process of rehabilitation by the Government began through his efforts. This was also a period of backlash when about 30% of the reformed “criminals” reverted to the cobweb of crime. It was at this stage that Mr Lavanam registered an organisation named as “Samskar”.

The fourth stage dealt with the backlash while also working for women empowerment and children’s rights through developmental intervention. This was the period when an international agency HANU, an affiliate of the Norwegian Humanist Association, entered the scene. All this involved a

process of consolidating the reform work and initiating development work. It was also a period of providing alternate sources of livelihood.

As regards alternative methods of livelihood, while it is possible to create and show socially and culturally acceptable avenues to earn money, it is not easy to make these ex-criminals work hard since they are used to easy methods of making money. Yet Mr Lavanam and his associates were fairly successful.

Some of them agreed to work on daily wages in the fields. Samskar offered soft interest-free loans to open small shops, tea stalls, bicycle repair shops. Others went house-to-house vending cloth. The Government granted about 130 acres of land for cultivation. Vocational training courses in typewriting and mechanical repairs were also organised. A few have become truck drivers. Samskar regulated these activities. A survey revealed that the number of criminals was reduced to just 12.

Vocational training courses in typewriting and mechanical repairs were also organised. A few have become truck drivers. Samskar regulated these activities. A survey revealed that the number of criminals was reduced to just 12.

**In the fifth stage, which is ongoing, the focus is on using education as a tool of social integration and working towards strengthening women empowerment.**

This has apparently been unprecedented in South India post-independence. Initially, a big hurdle was opposition by the community which felt that undue importance was given to

people branded criminals. Through continuous IEC activity, Mr Lavanam and his team could garner their co-operation and support.

Another example of Mr Lavanam's work in the social sector has been with the Joginis of Andhra Pradesh. They are either girls or young women from the Dalit Community in North Telangana. They are dedicated to the Goddess but later forced to become village sex workers. The centuries-old inhuman tradition made them lose their self-respect, sexuality, womanhood and motherhood.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh, after knowing their success in criminal tribe reforms, invited Mr Lavanam, his wife and Samskar to deal with this problem. An initial survey conducted by Samskar estimated the number of Joginis in Nizamabad district at around 2200 and in Medak district at around 400.

**Mr Lavanam and his team shouldered the responsibility of reforming and bringing Joginis into the mainstream in both the districts.**

It was such a deep-rooted practice that it seemed to be an impossible task to be accomplished. But with the help and support from the Government, international donor agencies and local civil society, they succeeded in totally eradicating the Jogini tradition by the year 2000.

What is still more credible is that Mr Lavanam and his team were able to get the reformed Jogini women and girls married and leading normal lives.

In addition to these major social reforms, Mr Lavanam was involved in several other activities promoting social awareness. He and his teams attempted to dismantle many superstitions rampant in the community.

For example, in parts of Telangana, people believed that an evil spirit by the name Banamati often invaded homes, possessed individuals and caused havoc in their family life. It was a herculean task for Mr Lavanam and his associates to convince the people that there were no evil spirits and what they experienced was only a paranoia.

Mr Lavanam had always promoted inter-caste marriages. He worked at two levels – he made youngsters accept the idea and then intervened to save them from the wrath of the elders.

He was also an active Sarvodaya leader and a member of Sewagram Ashram Trust Board. He was closely associated with all the Gandhian Institutions and the Vinoba Bhave Ashram in Pauniar. He was a member of Gandhi Smarak Nidhi Trust Board, the President of Servas International, India.

As a Sarvodaya leader, Mr Lavanam participated in several social and constructive programmes. In Palamu district of present Jharkhand, an industrial company was exploiting local Adivasis by purchasing Bauxite-rich land at very low rates.

Mr Lavanam succeeded in stopping this exploitation. The Maoists supported him in this task. At the same time, he was

able to stop harassment of the villagers of a particular caste by the Maoists. More recently in Andhra Pradesh Mr Lavanam had been working hard to get the Maoists to the discussion table.

In his seventies, Mr. Lavanam was still active and ambitious to bring the Naxalites and other extremists into the mainstream and into the fold of non-violence.

Even after his demise Lavanam continues to be of help to the community. He donated his eyes and his body for educational purposes to a medical college in Vijaywada.

In recognition of Mr. Lavanam's contribution in the field of social reforms, he has been decorated with many national and international awards –

#### Awards and Honours

1944 – Garmavaram Taluq Congress Committee's Gold Medal for the youngest Satyagrahi of Quit India Movement in Andhra; 1966- Andhra Hindi Prachar Sangham for his work in propagating Hindi ; 1991- Atheists United, USA (Los Angeles)'s title of Atheist of The decade; 1991- International Ambedkar Society, London's honour for his contribution for removal of untouchability and creation of a casteless society; 1997-Andhra Pradesh Government's honour for his contribution in reforming and rehabilitating Joginis in Andhra Pradesh and 2006-MB Gandhi Foundation, Nagpur's Mahatma Gandhi National Award for initiative in finding peaceful solution to Naxal problem among a dozen others.

## 11. The dispensable India: Data shows how DNTs, Adivasis, Dalits, Muslims bore lockdown brunt



These communities have suffered on most social indicators due to a mix of poor logistics as well as prejudice and ostracisation. Dalit, Muslim and Adivasi households and neighbourhoods have suffered terribly in the aftermath of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in the months following the declaration of the countrywide lockdown, data collected by a group of civil society organisations has showed. These communities were not able to avail food often due to government food distribution centres being located farther from their settlements and nearer to those of dominant castes. Communities like Muslims and denotified tribes have also suffered from Islamophobia and prejudice, that has taken a toll on food,

education, healthcare and other social indicators, the data showed. The initiative to collect data was led by civil society organisations including Partners in Change and Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices, the National Alliance Group of Denotified and Nomadic Tribes and Gethu Group workers' think tank. The initiative tries to get the real picture of the state of India's poor from the horse's mouth. Termed 'COLLECT' (an abbreviation for Community-Led Local Entitlements & Claims Tracker), the initiative consists of a flow of information between those at the margins, the authorities and wider society. The users of this information are the people who collect it and who the data is about – communities marginalised by social identity, occupation, gender and age.

Data was collected for the period between April and June 2020 for 476 locations covering more than 97,000 households in 11 states across India by representatives of 69 community-led organisations of Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis. Right to Food Food ration to the most marginalised communities in India during the lockdown was provided to all households in just 70 per cent locations, according to the data. Worse, four per cent of the locations reported that no household had received the promised dry ration. What is it that prevents people from accessing the most basic human right? "In many locations, there is no public infrastructure like ration shops in Dalit hamlets or Dalit-majority hamlets that provide people these welfare schemes," Ponuchamy, founder of Anal Folk-Art Troupe, Tamil Nadu and one of the data collectors said, while speaking at the Voices from Margins webinar on the

state of India's poor (April-June 2020) organised by Praxis. "Because of this, they do not get regular access to information about schemes and miss out on getting benefits when they need them," he added. "Many people are unaware about the Jan Dhan Yojana and they are not sure of the active account where the money is credited.

They were informed that their account was dormant so only a few who had an active account received the sum," Veronica Dung Dung, founder member of Samajik Seva Sadan, that works with Adivasis in Odisha, said. Among Muslim-dominated locations, the concern was the limited reach of the community to the block office, as a result of which, many households did not have necessary documents, according to Shahroz Fatima, Pragati Madhyam Samiti, Uttar Pradesh. People from nomadic and denotified tribes do not have ration cards, that require a caste certificate and most families do not have this, Rohini Chhari, an activist from Morena in Madhya Pradesh, said. She noted that in 73 per cent locations, women and children did not get supplementary nutrition. She attributed this to the criminalisation and stigma associated with the community, because of which the families lived away from the Anganwadi centres and hence fell off the radar. The data (which can be found on [www.communitycollect.info](http://www.communitycollect.info)) covers locations from the states of Bihar (69), Chhattisgarh (24), Gujarat (70), Jharkhand (20), Madhya Pradesh(61), Delhi (8), Odisha (80), Rajasthan (10), Tamil Nadu (75), Uttar Pradesh (50) and West Bengal (9).

**Accessibility and proximity** Besides the Right to Food, the data also looked at what support hamlets received through



other schemes earmarked for COVID relief. This included additional ration as part of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, the Ujjwala scheme, the Kisan Samman Yojana and the Jan Dhan Yojana. The data covered access to the disability, widow and old-age pensions for those eligible, the revised wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and social factors like child abuse, domestic violence and indebtedness. The proximity to service providers often determined the access to entitlements. And given that these communities are already marginalised, they become invisible to the system.

Like Chhari, Blacious Tigga, secretary of Gyan Sagar, Chhattisgarh, noted: "Due to the announcement of sudden lockdown, children were not able to access nutritious meals even once in a day. It was accessible for households living near the distribution centre." A National Infrastructure Equity audit conducted by Social Equity Watch in six states in 2011 noted how most services are located in neighbourhoods frequented by or easily accessed by dominant groups. In a pandemic like this, these inequities lead to gross violation of human rights as seen in the cases above. The inability to access relief being provided by the government, when seen against the 74 per cent locations mentioning an increase in indebtedness, show the implications of social inequities. For instance, 88 per cent of Dalit-dominated hamlets reported an increase in loan-taking. That is not all. Children were able to access online education in only one per cent of the locations. In comparison, 69 percent locations were such where no child was able to attend classes. While one half of India is debating

about how many hours of online classes should be held and what new technologies should aid education in these times, another half is grappling with the reality that education may become a distant dream in a country that is aspiring for a five trillion dollar economy. We are talking about smart phones and laptops in a country where in 58 per cent of locations, no child received free textbooks.

**Prejudice and ostracisation** Blatant Islamophobia led to a deep impact on those already struggling with financial losses. “Rumours spread about the Tablighi Jamaat by the government and the media led to a lot of hatred against the Muslim community. Boards were put up restricting the entry of Muslim hawkers in some areas. Those who are self-employed, like in tailoring and embroidery work, were anyway reeling under the lockdown’s impact,” Ruksana Vora, team leader at Sahyog, Gujarat, said. The high courts of Bombay, Madras and Karnataka have already termed the media coverage of the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi and the subsequent fracas as ‘unjust and unfair’. However, the harm has already been done. The data shows that while only 45 per cent Muslim habitations reported that all families got access to additional rations during the month of June, 23 per cent habitations did not have access to it and 56 per cent locations did not receive any supplementary nutrition from the Anganwadi centres. The impact showed on accessing healthcare too. Many people opted for over the counter drugs, rather than visiting the hospitals for fear of discrimination by doctors, Vora added.

**What can be done?** The situation cannot change unless there are immediate as well as long-term measures to address these issues. In terms of immediate measures is the demand for a cash transfer of Rs 6,000 per month from October 2020 to January 2021 according to the universal basic income to all poor households. Pooja Parvati of International Budget Partnership said, “This is not a huge sum. It can be accommodated by taxing the inheritance of the rich and affluent, giving a break to corporate subsidy and even rethinking government projects such as the Central Vista plan.” In the longer term, it is not just about providing rights and entitlements through equitable channels. To make these channels equitable, a strong representation of marginalised groups in decision-making at every level is a non-negotiable. But that again, is a distant dream at a time when one entire community of nomadic and denotified tribes are demanding that they be counted. Recognition as a rightful citizen of the country is the cornerstone of any progress we have to make out of this pandemic-induced alternate reality.

## **12. Involving indigenous people in environmental governance – the Sixth Schedule way**



Customary practices of the North East's tribal population are harmonious with nature. Extensive recognition and conferment of rights over the forest are belated legislative actions. In most indigenous societies, people believe humans and nature are deeply connected and inter-dependent, almost like kin to one another. Indigenous people across the world have often been regarded as exemplars of environmentally sustainable living. The impact of their subsistence livelihoods was apparently kept in check by customary laws to ensure they lived by the laws of nature. Solutions to a lot of current environmental problems lie in these traditions. These marginalised groups are gaining recognition as vital stewards of our environment and are gaining a role in environmental governance due to their unique traditions and laws, amid depleting resources. This UN proclamation recognised the role of indigenous people in environmental management and governance at an international level. A part of the Constitution of India also recognised this bond between indigenous people, their land and customary rights. The Sixth

Schedule of the Constitution is unique because it confers autonomy and right to self governance to indigenous people living in parts of north-eastern India.

**The Sixth Schedule** Provisions over the administration of tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura are contained in the Sixth Schedule. It provides for the establishment of autonomous district and regional councils. Each of these states have a couple of such councils, except Tripura which has one. These autonomous district and regional councils have their members elected from the local tribal population of their respective regions. In addition to the elected members, a few are nominated by the governors. The history of autonomous district councils goes back to the time of gaining independence. The Interim Government of India appointed the North-East frontier (Assam) Tribal and excluded areas committee to the Constituent Assembly, under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam. The committee recommended the setting up of autonomous district councils to provide autonomy and self-governance at the local level to the tribal population. The recommendation was later incorporated into the Sixth Schedule, Article 244 (2) and Article 275(1) of the Constitution of India. The district and regional councils almost function as autonomous states with significant executive, legislative and judicial powers. The councils have powers to legislate over several matters including land use, management of forests (except reserved forests and sanctuaries), inheritance, tribal customs, marriages, personal laws, appointment and succession of headmen, etc.

The councils have their own laws and regulations over the management of forests. Many of these laws derive from customary laws and often appreciate the close age-old relationship shared between indigenous people and the environment. A few such legislations include: 1. The Mizoram Forest Act, 1955 2. The Karbi Anglong Forests Act, 1957 3. The United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forests) Act, 1958 and its subsequent rules of 1960 District council forest laws – the enabling factor? An analysis of laws like the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forests) Act, 1958 show how the involvement of indigenous people in environmental governance was enabled. This was done by placing them at the focal point of forest management. The primary objective of the aforementioned law is the control and management of forests in the autonomous district council areas of Meghalaya's Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Deriving from local customary laws, this legislation classifies forests under the autonomous district council into eight different categories. These categories include private forests, sacred forests, green blocks, village forests, district council reserved forests and so on. The management of these forests exclusively lies in the hands of the local communities, apart from the categorisation. Section 3 (ii) of the act, for example, describes sacred forests. This, in turn, has benefitted both people and nature. A good illustration of this is the successful Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) initiative in Meghalaya's Mawphlang region, where 3,500 households from 62 villages managed to conserve and restore over 27,000

hectares of sub-tropical hill forests. This has not only led to the restoration of biodiversity and water sources like streams, but also increased the livelihood and income of local tribal people. Despite several positive aspects, the Sixth Schedule is not free from shortcomings. Over the years, there were several instances of corruption in the autonomous councils. The village heads or community leaders often reap most of the benefits, with barely any development trickling down to the actual beneficiaries. Laws over the control and management of forests in all the areas under the Sixth Schedule are not uniform as well. In Assam's Karbi Anglong district, the Karbi Anglong Forests Act, 1957 does not confer rights to communities over control and management of forests, unlike Meghalaya. Rights over forests lie exclusively in the hands of the district council. Apart from this, certain district councils do not have laws over the management and control of forests. They are, instead, under the jurisdiction of a state law.

**The road ahead** The success story of Mawphlang necessitates replication and serves as an apt model for showing the benefits accrued from involving indigenous people in environmental governance through incentivised programmes. Active community engagement in forest management, however, is still missing from certain district council legislations. These laws need amendments to increase participation of indigenous populations and legislations need to be adopted immediately in areas where they are missing. The ambit of the Sixth Schedule is not as inclusive as one would expect. Several tribes – particularly in Assam – are



still outside its realm. There lies a vast scope within the existing framework itself to include tribes such as the Mising, Tiwa, Rabha, etc who have long demanded inclusion. The customary practices of the North East's tribal population are harmonious with nature. Extensive recognition and conferment of rights over the forest are, thus, belated legislative actions. Despite its few shortcomings, the Sixth Schedule holds the potential to redefine community engagement and restore forest management to a co-dependent existence once stolen from these tribes by foreign powers. The future lies in restoring the past.

### **13. KVIC Sets 'Honey Mission' World Record, Gives 1000 Bee-Boxes to Kaziranga Tribals!**





The initiative is part of a greater mission, under which they envision distributing 1.3 lakh bee-boxes across four corners of the country,

Albert Einstein had once said that if bees disappeared from the surface of the Earth, man would have no more than four years left.

The winged creatures are now at risk of extinction, due to a reduction of green spaces and overuse of fertilisers and pesticides.

The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) is a Gandhian organisation that has been on the forefront of protecting honey bees from extinction. It has been imparting knowledge about beekeeping and their maintenance to the public at no cost.

**On May 20, which is commemorated as World Bee Day, KVIC set a world record by distributing the highest number of beekeeping boxes in a single day!**

Giving away 1,000 boxes to the Mishing tribe dwelling in the forests of Kaziranga, Assam, the organisation beat the previous record of 841 boxes, achieved by Israel two years ago.

Through this move, KVIC aims not only to encourage beekeeping but also to open up better avenues for employment for tribal communities in the region.

As many as 100 beneficiaries were given practical training on areas including the examination of honeybee colonies, acquaintance with apiculture equipment, identification and management of bee enemies and diseases, honey extraction and wax purification, and management of bee colonies in spring, summer, monsoon, autumn and winter seasons.

VK Saxena, Chairman, KVIC, told The Business Line, “The development initiatives by KVIC in Assam have given a ray of hope for the tribal people here, and they are willing to be a part of the development. Bee-keeping will also enhance the rich flora and fauna of the Kaziranga forest area through cross-pollination.”

He added that the production of 30,000 kg of high-quality honey is expected from these bee-boxes. KVIC also handed over honey bottles of 200g each to 500 school students of Sankardev Sishu Niketan at Kohera village in Kaziranga, as part of their World Bee Day celebrations.

The initiative is part of KVIC’s ambitious ‘Honey Mission’, under which they envision distributing 1.3 lakh bee-boxes across four corners of the country.

#### **14. Action on ground needed to tackle malnutrition: Experts on India's poor showing at Global Hunger Index**

A look at the last round of NFHS in 2015-2016 corroborates this as it shows that the country’s showing on parameters of ‘wasted’ and ‘severely wasted’ children had worsened. NEW DELHI: The recently released Global Hunger Index (GHI),

which ranked India on the 94th spot among 107 countries, underlines that India's commitment to eliminating hunger and malnutrition leaves much to be desired. A look at the last round of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in 2015-2016 corroborates this as it shows that the country's showing on parameters of 'wasted' and 'severely wasted' children had worsened compared to the previous survey in 2005-06.

NFHS-4 was conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, as designated by the Ministry of Health and Family. As compared to NFHS-3, the percentage of wasted children under five years of age had increased from 19.8% to 21% in NFHS-4 (See GFX-1). The percentage of children under five who were 'severely wasted' increased from 6.4% in NFHS-3 to 7.5% in NFHS-4.

This was corroborated in the GHI report which said that among the 11 countries where the public health significance of child wasting rate was considered 'high' or 'very high', India was in the latter category at 17.3 per cent. This paints a dismal picture of India's commitment to eliminating hunger and malnutrition as a part of achieving its sustainable development goals (SDGs), said activists working on food security. Deepa Bajaj, chief executive of the NGO Child Survival India, said budgetary allocation was an essential component of pushing the SDG agenda. The government has allocated Rs 35,600 crore for nutrition-related programmes in 2020-21 but action on the ground is needed, she said.

“It is essential for policymakers to realise that 'hunger' can be handled even by providing carbohydrate rich staple diets, but

‘nutrition’ needs proper balance of macro- and micro-nutrients in the diet and a multi-sectoral approach targeting women empowerment and education, tackling poverty and providing sanitation for all,” said Bajaj. Sachin Kumar Jain, a representative of Right to Food Campaign, said the SDGs remain restricted to academic discourse with states not adopting target-based approach in planning.

“India’s malnutrition management campaign is just focused on technical aspects and not on ensuring the rightful access of women and children to food and nutrition,” said Jain. States where the percentage of under-five children who were stunted – an indicator of malnutrition – was significantly higher than the national average were Bihar, Uttar Pradesh Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Meghalaya (See GFX-2). Bihar, Jharkhand, MP and UP also fared poorer than the already critical national average (35.8%) of children under-five who are underweight.

The state-specific indicators on all forms of malnutrition like stunting, wasting and underweight influence the aggregated data at national level, observed Arvind Singh, advisor, health and nutrition, at the NGO Matri Sudha. “Governments in high-burden states like Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, MP and Maharashtra must collaborate on various common parameters to address the issue.” Malnutrition can be controlled not only by intake of food but also by ensuring that infections like diarrhoea are prevented or treated at an early stage, pointed out Dr Abhay Bang, social activist and founder-director of Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health. Tribal areas & malnutrition

States with significant tribal population like MP, Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh fared poorly in terms of stunting, wasting, severely wasting and children being underweight. With 40.6% of the Scheduled Tribe population living below the poverty line as compared to 20.5% of the non-tribal population, as documented by the 2011 Census data, malnutrition is worse among tribal children. Data shows 42% tribal children were underweight while under-five mortality rate among the ST population was 57.2 per 1,000 live births. “Food diversity which tribal people had when they had access to forests has now been jeopardised. Plus, not enough money is being spent on tribal health,” said Bhang, who led the expert committee which brought out a report on tribal health 2018.

### 15. The language of the Tangams, with just 253 speakers



Who are the Tangams and why is their case reflective of the larger issue of eroding languages across linguistically diverse Arunachal Pradesh? We explain. Last week Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu released a book titled *Tangams: An Ethnolinguistic Study Of The Critically Endangered Group of Arunachal Pradesh*. “Language loss is the reason for cultural erosion,” CM Khandu had said, emphasising how the book will help the future generations of the Tangam community, which has reportedly 253 speakers concentrated in one small hamlet of Arunachal Pradesh. But who are the Tangams and why is their case reflective of the larger issue of eroding languages across linguistically diverse Arunachal Pradesh? We explain. Who are the Tangams? The Tangams are a little-known community within the larger Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and reside in the hamlet of Kugging in Upper Siang district’s Painedem circle. For long, the only account of the Tangams could be found in bureaucrat Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee’s book, *Tangams* (1975) where the community’s population was pegged at 2,000 spread across 25 villages. From 2016 to 2020, a team from the Centre for Endangered Languages (CFEL) of Rajiv Gandhi University (RGU), carried out extensive field research and documented the community.

“Our survey revealed that Tangams were now concentrated in only one village (Kugging), with 253 reported speakers,” said Lisa Lomdak, Assistant Coordinator, CFEL and Assistant Professor, Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies (AITS), RGU. Why are there only 253 speakers? As per the UNESCO World Atlas of Endangered Languages (2009),

Tangam – an oral language that belongs to the Tani group, under the greater Tibeto-Burman language family – is marked ‘critically endangered’. Kugging is surrounded by a number of villages inhabited by Adi subgroups such as Shimong, Minyongs, as well as the Buddhist tribal community of Khambas, among others. To communicate with their neighbours over the years, the Tangams have become multilingual, speaking not just Tangam, but other tongues such as Shimong, Khamba and Hindi.

“They rarely speak their own language now since their population is restricted to a single village. Their neighbours are various Adi subgroups, so they have picked up other Adi languages and their own is slowly disappearing – even if a few still continue to speak Tangam,” said Kaling Dabi, Senior Research Fellow CFEL, who is doing a PhD on the Tangam community. Moreover, the Tangams are relatively unknown – even within Arunachal Pradesh. “The village lacks proper infrastructure in all basic sectors of education, health, drinking water facilities, road and electricity. Roads have reached Kugging only in 2018. Not a single person from the community has gone to university,” said Lomdak. What about other languages in Arunachal Pradesh? The languages of Arunachal Pradesh have been classified under the Sino-Tibetan language family, and more specifically under the Tibeto-Burman and Tai group of languages, such as Lolo-Burmish, Bodhic, Sal, Tani, Mishmi, Hruish and Tai.

While the education system has introduced Devanagari, Assamese and Roman scripts for most tribal languages, new

scripts such as Tani Lipi and Wancho Script have been developed by native scholars. According to Professor S Simon John, Director AITS & Coordinator, CFEL, RGU, there has been no systematic, scientific or official survey on the number of languages in Arunachal Pradesh till recently. An official linguistic survey by the state government began only in 2018, which is currently underway. Before that, People's Linguistic Survey of India was published in 2017. Still, experts peg the number of languages at 32-34, with a disclaimer that it is not a conclusive figure. "If we list the various linguistic varieties or dialects embedded within these languages, then the list can go upto to 90," said Lomdak.

Simon said that despite there being a plethora of languages in the state, almost all are endangered. According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2009) more than 26 languages of Arunachal Pradesh have been identified as endangered. The degrees range from 'unsafe', 'definitely endangered' to 'critically endangered'. Why are the languages at risk? The diversity of languages has led various communities to depend on English, Assamese and colloquial variety of Hindi called Arunachalee Hindi as the link languages. Many believe this shift has led to loss of native languages of the tribal communities. "Even the numerically larger tribes like Nyishi, Galo, Mishmi, Tangsa etc. whose population exceed the ten thousand mark are also not safe from endangerment, hence marked unsafe," states a 2017 CEFL research newsletter. "The classification implies that the younger generation of these tribes especially in the urban areas have mostly discarded the use of their mother



tongue” it further states. Are languages like Tangam more vulnerable to extinction? Yes. The Tangam case is especially worrying because their population is so low.

“Another critically endangered language is Meyor but they are better off than Tangam because they at least have a population of 1,000 odd people,” said Dabi, “So while almost all languages of Arunachal Pradesh are endangered, smaller languages are more vulnerable, and extinction is directly proportional to population.” Over the years, smaller groups – like Tangam – have become multilingual and learn several languages as a survival tool. “Our studies on Meyor show a major language shift from mother tongue to neighbouring languages like Miju Mishmi, Hindi etc,” said Lomdak, “While smaller groups have been successful in retaining their knowledge systems and language to an extent despite facing acute hardships related to health, economic and illiteracy, elders worry about the decreasing competency of younger members in speaking their languages and their tendency to dismiss their own languages.” Will the new book help? Yes, the 350-paged book, with photographs, becomes relevant for the future generation of Tangam people.

“The significance of the present study is the multidisciplinary approach as it takes into account not only language, but also rituals, folklore, food habits, belief systems etc,” said Simon. According to Lomdak, the book attempts to cover “every aspect of Tangam life and culture” that will help the future children retain their unique identity as an ethnolinguistic group. “Though there are some excellent

contemporary works on language of Tangams written by renowned linguists in collaboration with native speakers, this book will appeal to those interested in ethnolinguistics, anthropology and folkloristics of lesser studied tribes,” she said, adding the book has valuable data on endangered oral narratives like ritual songs, lamentation songs, lullabies and festival songs.

## 16. Forest depts as nodal agency for community forest resources: A political blunder



The Chhattisgarh government issued an order on May 31, 2020 making the state forest department the nodal agency for Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR) under the Scheduled Tribes and the Traditional Forest Dwellers Act, 2006. The move invoked discontent from several quarters. Alok Shukla, coordinator of Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan (CBA), called the move ‘illegal’. Article 11 of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) [FRA] Act, 2006, states that only agencies authorised by the ministry or the central government can be the nodal agency for CFFR. The reason behind it is clear: The

forest department has been involved in activities that have brought injustice to the tribal and forest-dwelling communities of India and the department is a stakeholder in the process of settling forest rights.

Since the colonial times, the state forest department has committed numerous atrocities and injustice against these communities, which makes it a party for settling their rights. The recent order, too, betrays the FRA to its core. A similar order was passed by the Raman Singh government in 2017, under which alcohol sale was brought under strict state government control, leading to the closing of makeshift stalls that sold country liquor, including mahua. The order was a violation of Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 [PESA Act] and the FRA. Both Acts validate the customary rights of tribal communities. In the fifth schedule areas of the state, restrictions could not be imposed on food and cultural-traditional practice of tribal communities under the excise laws applicable in the non schedule areas, according to the PESA Act.

Another example was seen in 2018. With an ambition of promoting mobile services in Chhattisgarh, Raman Singh government rolled back the untied 14th Finance Commission (FFC) funds allocated to panchayats so the “mobile companies could be paid for erecting mobile towers”. A report by Alok Putul published on February 2, 2018, stated that Rs 6,100 million were taken back from the bank accounts of 9,810 panchayats. This was about 70 per cent of the total

FFC grant. Within a week, however, the state government had to repeal the order – the FFC funds can be used for essential requirements of the village and only gram sabhas and panchayats have the right to take decisions on the utilisation of these funds. The Raman Singh government tried to establish mobile communication as an essential service, but failed. The present chief minister and the then state Congress president, Bhupesh Baghel, also criticised these two decisions. In both cases, Baghel attempted to protect the autonomy of Panchayats and traditional rights of adivasis. The May 31, 2020 order, however, proves that when power comes to them, politicians don't hesitate to mend or break laws. It also proves that the state government has no intention to prioritise the initiatives towards settling community rights over forest and natural resources.

They only intend to prolong the process, so that the natural resources can be controlled by them. It is proven that the forest department has deep-seated colonial roots. With all 'good intentions', the department is still working towards establishing undisputed control over forests and its resources. Hence, it is observed that in the process of settling rights of forest dependent communities, the forest department is creating obstacles. After all, allowing the state forest department to be the nodal agency is not only against the law, but against the universal law of 'natural justice' as well. The government has to understand that the department itself is a party here, which needs to hand over the control of forest resources to forest dependent communities. It is the core objective of the FRA, 2006, which is backed by fact that

protection of wildlife, biodiversity and forest conservation is only possible with the symbiotic relationship between forests and forest-dependent communities. A forest department is nothing more than an administrative unit under the law that takes care of the forest in the absence of an able system. In theory, as soon FRA, 2006 came into existence, these rights were transferred to these communities. After its implementation, the rights of forest resources should be transferred to the Gram Sabhas. The move, hence, is not only a political blunder, but can also be seen as an attempt to recolonise resources. This step will end up raising questions on the government's intention towards the well-being of people.

The state government did take initiatives towards settling forest rights claims. By raising support price of minor forest produce and making arrangements for forest dependent communities in the middle of the ensuing novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, Baghel has earned the reputation of a tribal-friendly CM. It will not be easy for the state government to repaint the picture tainted dull with historical injustice. On the basis of his three-decade long research, advocate Anil Garg found that several issues were resolved in undivided Madhya Pradesh, but which were not initiated for resolution in Chattisgarh. These include cases related to resources registered for the community's traditional rights, public and welfare purposes of the forest items in revenue villages, forest records and Khasra registers and patwari maps in the forest and non-forest items. There have also been cases related to reporting of protected forests

or the matter relating to filing of deauthorisation of notified lands in section 34A. Apart from this, there has been no initiative on the offenses being done since 1996 in the name of orange land. Significantly, a special task force was formed in MP to address the pending cases. These issues have been investigated in detail, and have brought to light the gross administrative negligence of the state government. The Chhattisgarh government should also take similar initiatives in the direction of correcting historical mistakes for permanent resolution of these issues. The article was originally written in Hindi and was translated by Siddharth Bhatt from SRUTI

### 17. 30 Years On, Mandal Commission Is Still a Mirror for India



V.P. Singh sacrificed his political career but was determined to bring about social justice. What is social justice? As India

celebrates 30 years of the world largest affirmative action programme, Mandal Commission – and also the 89th birthday of V.P. Singh, my bubba (grandfather), who introduced it in the country – it is time to reflect on his sacrifice and the victory against the hegemony of caste elites, and perhaps get a glimpse into his vision for social justice. “Caste, for 5000 years, has been the basis of unbridled torture and ostracisation, now it has become the basis of justice,” Bubba’s unforgettable words echoed the Supreme Court’s verdict on India’s affirmative action program that gave 27% reservation to Other Backward Class (OBCs) in government jobs and later on in education too. But how did he understand this? Born in 1931, in the royal palace of Daiya, he was soon adopted by the King of Manda, but the cloistered palaces didn’t stop our “modern Siddharth” (Acharya Vinoba Bhave gave him this title in 1956) from venturing into the villages to empathise with the depressed classes. He came from an India where birth defined who you were and then could become.

Most of the backward castes had no means of education, nor any opportunity for economic upliftment. Despite living in independent India, the lower castes were still shackled to their wells, their hunger and a degraded life. Caste violence, sexual abuse and forced labour, were daily experiences for many rural, lower-caste families, as the upper castes pillaged their dignity to keep “them under control”. “India is perhaps the only place where the majority is oppressed and disfranchised by a minority,” he would say, commenting on the socio-economic foundations of the caste hierarchy. Since

he was a child, he had seen this rampant subjugation and wanted to “break the chains”. Bubba found solace in books on science and philosophy – Gandhi, Plato, etc in his “favourite place in the world”, the banks of the river Belan. A young V.P. Singh, already a king at ten, with all the comforts of the world, was nudged by destiny towards renunciation and a tenacity for justice and truth. Instead of enjoying his royal life, he spent his twenties in social work – building roads, digging wells and organising inter caste meals (which was shocking for the upper castes) in the Koraon area. Eventually, he invited Vinoba Acharya Bhave to bless his Bhoodan (gift of land) to the landless and inaugurate a school he had built. Before we come to the Mandal issue, we need to rewind to 1989 and understand the circumstances under which Bubba ascended to the prime ministership.

It was a time when corruption was at a high, insurgencies in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and North-east were peaking, and the Indian republic, in an attempt to become an empire, had sent military forces into Sri Lanka. The economy was faltering as our external debt stood at 20% of GDP and foreign reserves were very low. The fatigue of the green revolution was evident, as farmers were heavily indebted; most of all, communal forces were fomenting hatred. After exposing political collusion and bribery in various defence deals, he resigned from Rajiv Gandhi’s cabinet and was expelled from the Congress party. While the distance between him and the political elites grew, his fight for truth and his “Mr Clean” image endeared him to the people. They rewarded him by voting his Janata Dal into power; my



grandfather became the prime minister. Mustering up courage, I once asked him what the Mandal Commission was to him? And why did he implement it? In a soft voice, he had answered: "The day I was sworn in, it was clear that the BJP would not allow the government to function beyond two years, as they wanted to run the government themselves. So I already knew that we would have to work very hard to implement the promise in our manifesto to implement the Mandal Commission. It was the sole mission of my prime ministership, to free millions of Indians and their children from the clutches of an oppressive system and give them social justice. I had a duty to break status quo and free these people in India's villages."

In retrospect, political and upper-caste anti-Mandal commentators have conveniently overlooked the Action Plan of the Janata Dal, which was released in November 1989, which had clearly said: "A cabinet committee will be set up in January 1990 for consideration of the recommendations of the second Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission)." This was published across all major newspapers. And V.P. Singh kept that promise by appointing a committee under Devi Lal to look into the matter and announce the Mandal Commission by the budget session. But due to internal political differences over the election of Jat leader Om Prakash Chautala, Devi Lal's son, and the exclusion of Jats from then report, Devi Lal stalled the report's release. Post Devi Lal, Singh entrusted Ram Vilas Paswan with the job and gave him till August to deliver the report for implementation. Paswan completed the process by

the end of July, and then, on August 7, 1990, V.P. Singh broke the oppressive, 5000-year-old power structures with a single ordinance. This was the biggest social revolution after India's independence. V.P. Singh's sacrifice was like that of Prometheus, stealing fire from upper castes elites to empower the oppressed majority. A damning punishment followed for Singh. There were threats to his life, character assassination and allegations of political opportunism. But Bubba was unfazed. Much later, he would recall, "People now build their political careers on social justice, I sacrificed mine for it – do you think I cared for the whims of the one percent or for political power?" He believed, and rightly so, that "releasing and implementing the Mandal commission report was the only way to integrate India, and heal caste wounds inflicted for over 5000 years." For him, the Mandal Commission was a mirror for our society, and changed political power dynamics forever.

In 1996, he was offered the PM's post again, but he refused with a poem: "Muflis se ab chor ban raha hoon mein Par es bhare baazaar se churaaun kyaa Yaha vahi cheezei saji hain jinhe lutaakar main muflis ban chukaa hoon. (From a pauper I'm becoming a thief But this grand bazaar is full of things I gave away To become a pauper, now what should I steal?)" His 11-month old government finally fell when he arrested and foiled Lal Krishna Advani's plan to demolish the Babri Masjid – another sacrifice for Mother India. But his fight for social justice didn't end after his resignation. He made a pledge in Gorakhpur, that he would not return to Delhi until the Mandal commission report had been implemented across

the country. He spent the next eight months going from state to state, addressing rally after rally, until the Supreme Court's verdict upheld the ordinance. "Violence, can never bring justice, and hate can never bring peace," he would say when we talked about the upper caste unrest against him. Being the Prime Minister, he could use the state forces, and that too violently to suppress people, but he didn't. A group of non-upper caste students visited him after the announcements. They were extremely angry at the anti Mandal protesters. "The papers said all youth are against VP Singh, we are youth too; we represent 80% of them, OBC and minorities included, yet we are still not counted among them. When China and Pakistan, took our land, no one self-immolated themselves, but now when finally backwards caste students get an opportunity to dignified livelihoods and affirmative action they are protesting? We want to counter them in the streets too," they said. To this, he replied, "By choosing violence you will mirror your oppressors, so do nothing violent, but study and build your lives. Let them crucify me, if they want, you should not stray from the path of justice and truth". This story was the final lesson in social justice.

He would later remark, that the Mandal commission was never about imposing 27% or even 5% reservation, but about giving fair representation to the backward classes of India. It was about changing the social composition of India. In his vision, he wanted to even give reservations to economically backward upper-caste people, but that would require a constitutional amendment and appealed several times to

double the opportunities for education and government employment. V.P. Singh as the PM had a choice – to surrender to political elites and corporations or to destroy them. He chose the latter and his fight for social justice transformed India, and unshackled millions by ending caste-based apartheid. To his dying breath, he continued to be a voice for the voiceless.

### **18. The perversion of centralising coal mining**



On June 11, 2020, Union Minister for Minister of Coal, Mines and Parliamentary Affairs Pralhad Joshi announced the first commercial auction for coal in the country in a tweet on June 18, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi attending. The minister said the auction was a step towards *aatmanirbharta* (self-reliance) in the coal sector. Questions arise as to why the process of auction was celebrated as a festival, especially when this is not the first time an auction of coal mines was being done. It was said this auction will be completely

different from auctions organised by previous regimes. But how? The response to this question is also illustrated in a press release from the Press Information Bureau (PIB): 1. Regulations by previous governments on the coal sector, including prices and end-use limited the scope of growth. These regulations will no longer exist. 2. Proposed conditions in the new auction are very flexible, allowing new companies to take part. 3. The deposit for auction was reduced and an advance amount will be adjusted in place of royalties 4. Indicators of working capacity have been liberalised to encourage flexibility in the operation of such coal mines. The process of auction will be transparent 100 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) will be approved through automatic routes, renewable financial terms and a revenue sharing model based on the National Coal Index Companies bidding in auctions to which coal mines are allocated will be given flexibility in production of coal with provisions to encourage them if they are able to start production and gasification early.

This was not the case in previous governments. How is the auction process a new and renewed hope for realizing the great dream of a self-sustainable India? PIB said the auction process would “lay a strong foundation for energy security in the country by producing additional coal providing large-scale employment and huge opportunities for investment in coal sector.” The efforts will supplement a billion-tonne production of coal from Coal India in 2023-24 and meet the full requirement of domestic thermal coal, according to PIB. A cheap advertisement to portray coal as an attractive and

exotic product raises a lot of questions the government should answer. How will a country – by selling its natural resources and wealth – become self-reliant? There is no convincing argument made to this fundamental question. Who will receive revenue from the 100 per cent FDI? How can a sovereign government expect to achieve the goals of self-reliance if everything is financed by foreign investment? Commercial coal mining The current Union government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), opened up the commercial use of coal by passing the coal ordinance when it first came to power. Only government-owned companies were found eligible for this. The taking away of regulations for commercial use and exploitation of coal is now being extended to private entrepreneurs and companies as well. The conservation – extended by the policy of nationalisation and disallowing this – is now completely rejected, leading to coal becoming a commodity for free exchange in the market. The meaning of liberalising coal

Coal manufacture was carried out to achieve domestic energy needs and its end uses, thus, were to power up thermal power plants, steel manufacture and energy needs of other industries. This ensured coal does not become a commodity in itself, but is an essential allied product in production. If this had not been done – and if coal could have been sold openly in the market – it would be tremendously difficult for our own industries to run and the cost of finished products would have been much higher. To see coal as a finished product in itself and to free it for

commercial use might seem as a good opportunity to some bidders. In the long term, it will lead to raising the production cost of essential items, which is neither in the interest of the country nor anywhere close to the vision of a self-reliant India. Proposed flexibilities in auction To ensure success, the auction has made less competitive: Only two bidders are allowed to take it forward. Three or four bidders were earlier mandatory. The first term of the Narendra Modi-led government organised similar auctions that were largely understood to be failures. The government organised auctions 72 times to auction 65 coal blocks and allocated only 31. A five-phase process began from February 2015 to July 2017. The last two auctions had to be cancelled as there were no companies willing to take up mining. Out of eight phases of auction in 2018, five were cancelled again as there were no buyers. In auctions organised till 2017, a rule of having at least three bidders was flouted by the same company participating in the bidding through sister concerns, which was noted by the Comptroller and Auditor General in its 2017 report. In light of these experiences, the proposed auction on June 18 is said to bring in flexibilities, but to what end? It might seem like the government is attempting these measures to ensure coal production.

If there is no demand or consumption in the country, then what will the positive take-aways be from such a process? Relaxations being brought in the working capacities of mining operators will directly lead to no regulation on when and how mining will be carried out. The supply of coal – an

essential part of domestic industry – could be erratic in the absence of a clear policy. This auction process will in no way lead to increase in revenue or save the sinking economy.

Attack on the federal structure. A pertinent question is the powers of state and local governments in determining the use of natural resources of the country and rejecting the significance of their roles in the federal structure. This severely damages the constitutional freedom guaranteed to them. In the past six years, the BJP-led government has taken many decisions that diminish the independence and inherent powers of states. We have seen the fight against the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has been centralised, with one individual calling the shots. The entire country faces problems as a result of this tendency. Earlier, state governments had powers to take decisions over mines in their respective geographical areas, something that found an echo in a 2014 Supreme Court order that recognised mines allocation as “essentially performed by state governments”. The role of Gram Sabhas here is also a crucial question of constitutionality: The powers of village bodies as owners of natural resources were recognised in fifth schedule areas under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and in the rest of the country under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. It is noteworthy that Gram Sabhas – in a letter in 2015 to Modi – said coal blocks under their jurisdiction should not be auctioned as they disallow coal mining in-principle. This is a visible disregard for powers of state governments and will also lead to an overwhelming loss of revenue. It will also ignore the constitutional rights of Gram Sabhas. It must be noted that a few state governments already oppose the



Centre's attempt to auction coal mines. Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren already wrote a letter expressing the state's opposition.

It is possible other states may soon follow suit. Natural resources and centralisation of power We must remember that a similar attempt at centralisation was done through the imposition of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime, the ill-effects of which are still being faced by the country three years later. A similar event was organised with pomp and show when GST was implemented: A simple matter of tax reforms were celebrated as if the country attained independence from foreign rule. A special parliamentary session was called at midnight, for the fourth time in the history of independent India. The first three times this was done on August 15 in 1947, 1972 and 1997, to mark the occasion of independence and its anniversaries. The causes behind the failure of GST are the same perverted attempt at centralisation. State governments have fallen in line with the Centre – stripped of their powers to collect taxes – leading to a visible impact on essential services provided to citizens of these states. We must remember that national interest does not mean to take away powers of the state government and reject the authority of local governments. One can only hope that advertisements to sell off our natural resources will not lead to another coal-related scandal and that we will be able to recognise coal as a national heritage.

### **19. No poll heat in Dediapada, eco-sensitive notification**

## unknown to many tribals

The election campaign is conspicuous by its absence -- only two hoardings of the four BJP candidates contesting the Narmada District Panchayat elections serve as a reminder that an election is coming up on Sunday.



On a scorching afternoon, in the thick of ongoing local body poll campaigns, Dediapada town should have been witnessing the heat of the political activity.

But, instead, the main junction represents the picture of a world from another time. The election campaign is conspicuous by its absence — only two hoardings of the four

BJP candidates contesting the Narmada District Panchayat elections serve as a reminder that an election is coming up on Sunday.

At a sugarcane juice stall, owned by UP-migrant Ram Singh Yadav, visitors display as much ignorance about the upcoming poll issues as Yadav himself.

“I have been living in Dediapada for 40 years and I am a voter. But here, we have only seen parties joining hands and working together. We only vote for the parties that our families have been traditionally voting for,” he says.

After almost half an hour, the first election tempo of the Bhartiya Tribal Party (BTP) makes an appearance – on the loudspeaker is the promise of “protection of tribal rights, restoration of ownership on their land.”

Several villages in the taluka have been included under the classification of 121 villages of Narmada district as eco-sensitive zones, as per the May 2016 notification of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), which is being implemented since November last year.

The issue of the eco-sensitive zone had caused much uproar across the tribal belt of Narmada. It was after BJP Bharuch MP Mansukh Vasava’s resignation from the BJP that the state government directed the district administration to withdraw the ‘revenue records entry’ of the villages as ‘ESZ’. The notification, however, remains in place without the explicit mention of individual records.

Vasava had withdrawn his resignation after the government decided to erase the entries on the documents.

About five kilometres away from the town junction is the first settlement of villages – Navagam, Bogaj, Jawali and Koliwad – falling under the eco-sensitive zone. Sarpanch Mulji Vasava is a BJP candidate for the Dediapada taluka panchayat.

Mulji is busy campaigning in the neighbourhood villages – the topic of discussion is “Vikas (development) for job opportunities”. Examples of Kevadia turning into a tourist hub are cited and no one wants the implementation of the eco-sensitive zone. Mulji says, “The issue of the eco-sensitive zone is not worrisome anymore because all gram sabhas have passed a resolution against the implementation of the notification... On this matter, all three parties – BTP, Congress and BJP – have come together and assured the tribals that the government will not take away their lands. The area has basic amenities already, we have new schools built here. Bogaj village cluster has a literacy rate of 72% and Koliwad 63%. People want employment for a better future.”

Like Mulji, three other sarpanches of the neighbouring villages are also BJP candidates. Mulji also expressed hope that the BJP would win the seats of the Dediapada taluka panchayat this time – in 2015, the BJP lost power to BTP here. The JD(U) won 12 of the 22 seats while BJP won six and Congress four. The JD(U) then led by Chhotu Vasava, broke away from the parent party to become BTP and was in alliance with Congress. Now, the BTP has tied up with All

India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM) for the local body polls.

A senior elected representative of the Congress from the district says that the three parties did not want to create a political issue out of the eco-sensitive zone and decided to resolve it together.

In the villages, the local tribals do not know what eco-sensitive notification means. A group of young men from Bogaj village break into a laugh when asked about the notification. Khimji Vasava, a 25-year-old villager says, "We have been told that the government is trying to establish their right on our lands. But all the leaders have told us that they are fighting against it and in the local newsletters of the town, we read reports of how the leaders succeeded in pushing the government back. So, we have full faith in them and we know nothing wrong will happen."

The BTP, on the other hand, has been running its campaign on the tribal issues of land ownership. Ambalal Jadav, spokesperson of BTP, says, "The issue of the eco-sensitive zone is a grave one. It reflects the ideology of the BJP and the Congress of the disregard they have towards the existence of the tribals. The BTP was the one raising the issue of the land rights of tribals ... We are trying to make them aware that the government has only removed the explicit mention of the word 'eco-sensitive zone' from the revenue records, it does not change the status of the notification."

At the town junction, Rakesh Vasava, a 23-year-old graduate from the Industrial Training Institute in the town, says, "We



don't have too many employment opportunities here. There is a training institute but the placement has not been well paid. There are some who have got employment in the Dudhdhara dairy plant but most of the youth have to move to other cities. Even if they develop Dediapada like Kevadia, how many years would it be from now?"

## 20. Shri Arjun Munda launches two Centers of Excellence for tribal welfare in partnership with Art of Living



Strengthening of PRIs in tribal areas will empower them in matters relating to decision making and development of their community. The Union Minister of Tribal Affairs, Shri Arjun Munda, launched two Centers of Excellence for Tribal Welfare

in a collaboration between Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) and Art of Living (AoL) through video conference here today. Gurudev Sri Sri Ravishankar, Art of Living graced the occasion. Minister of State for Tribal Affairs Smt. Renuka Singh Saruta, Secretary, MoTA Shri Deepak Khandekar and J Shri Navaljit Kapoor were also present.

Addressing on the occasion, Shri Arjun Munda said that it is a very praiseworthy initiative of Art of Living (AoL) to launch two Centres of Excellence in partnership with MoTA- first CoE in the field of training tribal farmers in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra on sustainable natural farming based on Go-Adharith farming techniques; and second CoE in the field of 'Strengthening PRIs' in 5 districts covering 30 Gram Panchayats and 150 villages of Jharkhand. The Union government is fully committed to the welfare of tribal people of our country. Shri Munda said that a large amount of funds to the tune of more than Rs. 2 lakh crore is allocated exclusively for tribal development across the country.

Giving details, the Tribal Affairs Minister said that with the active participation of volunteers of Art of Living, the purpose of tribal welfare will be served. It will be a step towards fulfilling the Prime Minister's dream of Aatmnirbhar Bharat. He hoped that this work will be accomplished very soon and more and more people and institutions will get involved with such move. The tribal people are completely devoted to protect the nature and save the environment, the Minister elaborated.

Shri Arjun Munda explained that strengthening of tribal Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) will also help to educate them about their constitutional rights. He hoped that this will empower the PRIs in matters relating to decision making and development of their community. Smt. Renuka Singh Saruta in her address said that the Ministry of Tribal Affairs is running many programs for the welfare of tribals. The Ministry is working in collaboration with many NGOs and social organizations who are also doing a commendable job in this field. Art of Living has a vast network of volunteers who will make this program successful.

Gurudev Sri Sri Ravishankar in his address opined that we have to learn a lot from tribal people as they are very responsible towards cleanliness and conservation of environment. He dwelt upon the experience of running AoL School in Ghatashila, Jharkhand where skill development has been incorporated in educational curriculum. AoL is running 750 schools all over India. He emphasized that Dental Hygiene and Mental Hygiene both are very necessary in our villages. He assured that the volunteers of AoL will wholeheartedly work to make these tribal welfare schemes successful. Secretary, MoTA, Shri Deepak Khandekar appreciated the already ongoing efforts of AoL in tribal areas. MoTA and AoL partnership will further help to expand these welfare activities, he added. Smt. Yatinder Prasad, JS (FA) conveyed vote of thanks to dignitaries. The first initiative 'Strengthening PRIs' will be launched in 5 districts covering 30 Gram Panchayats and 150 villages of Jharkhand, in



creating awareness among elected representatives of PRI about various Tribal Acts and Rules and different welfare schemes available for these tribals and help them getting access to these schemes.

The model is designed to create the youth volunteers among the tribal youths by giving them personality development training, instilling the sense of social responsibility among them and thereby creating the tribal leaders who will work for their community in spreading this awareness. The second is about training 10000 tribal farmers in Aurangabad District of Maharashtra on sustainable natural farming based on Go-Adharith farming techniques. Farmers will be helped in getting the Organic certification and the marketing opportunities will be made available to them to make each of them Atmanirbhar Tribal Farmers.