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PHYSICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Archaeologists unearth remains of 4,000 years old settlement in Odisha's Balasore

Articles, dating back from 2000 BC to 100 BC and belonging to the Chalcolithic phase, Iron age and Early Historic period have been recovered from the Balasore district in Odisha.

In a significant development, archaeologists have discovered fortified historical sites in Odisha's Balasore district. Articles, dating back from 2000 BC to 100 BC and belonging to the Chalcolithic phase, Iron age and Early Historic period have been recovered for the first time in Durgadevi and Ranasahi in Balasore.

The Balasore district holds a prominent place in history for its maritime activities from the early part of the Christian era to the late medieval period. However, no major early historic sites were documented previously in this region, prior to the discovery of Durgadevi and Ranasahi.

Simultaneously, Buddhism flourished along with maritime activities in this region. Buddhist remains have been found from Ayodhya, Jayarampur, Kupari, Sujanagarh, Soro, Bardhanpur areas as well.

Odishan Institute of Maritime & South East Asian Studies (OIMSEAS), after getting permission from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in February this year, carried out the first phase of excavation from March to May 5.

Located 20 km from Balasore town, bordering the Mayurbhanj district, the Durgadevi site has a circular mud fortification of about 4.9 km in circumference between the river Sona on the south and Burahabalang on its north-eastern side.

The point of OIMSEAS archaeologists' study was to correlate simultaneous growth and development of maritime activities, with urbanisation on the east coast of India linking the Ganga valley in the north and the Mahanadi valley in central Odisha. Their focus was particularly on the early cultural development in northern Odisha.

They carried out horizontal excavation over 2 acres of high land area where a cultural deposit of about four to five metres was seen. In the first phase of work, scientific archaeological digging was carried out in the selected trenches, which were up to 2.6 metres.

The three cultural phases discovered at the site are — Chalcolithic (2000 to 1000 BC), Iron Age (1000 to 400 BC) and Early Historic Period (400 to 200 BC). These phases cover the time period from 2000 BC to 200 BC, which means 4000 to 2000 years from the current time.

"While excavating we discovered remnants of ChalcolithicBronze, Iron and Urban Culture," archaeologist and OIMSEAS secretary Dr Sunil Kumar Patnaik said.

Chalcolithic Period (2000 to 1000 BC)

During excavation, the excavators discovered the base of circular huts, black on red painted pottery, black slipped ware, red slipped ware and copper objects belonging to the Chalcolithic period (2000 to 1000 B.C.).

The floor of the circular huts was rammed with red soil mixed with Genguti. The base of the circular hut and utilitarian objects indicated the lifestyle of people, who were mostly leading a settled life with agriculture, domestication of animals and fishing as occupation.

Iron Age (1000 to 400 BC)

The evidence and remains of the Iron Age period (1000 to 400 B.C.) found from the area included pottery remains of black burnished

ware, black and red ware, red polished fine black ware with slip and chocolate ware, terracotta sling balls, hopscotch along with iron objects like nails, arrowhead, crucible and slag of various kinds.

The lifestyle of this phase is marked little improved and it depended on agriculture and production of various other crops. People during this period also led a settled life. The use of iron is a landmark phase in the growth of civilization in Odisha, particularly in North Odisha.

Early Historic Phase (400 to 100 BC)

During this phase, fortification of the area started, which also led to the beginning of King's rule.

The remnants of pottery specimens of red ware, red polished ware, black slipped ware, coarse grey ware, fine and superfine grey ware, terracotta ear studs, bangles, beads, hopscotch stopper, gamesman, terracotta wheels and some conical objects were found.

“During this phase, people became more advanced and improved from an agricultural base to trade, construction of fortifications around the site with a moat which signify the emergence of urbanisation at Durgadevi from around 400 to 200 BCE,” said Dr Patnaik.

"However, we are trying to get an absolute date for the site through AUC, Inter-University Accelerator Centre, New Delhi. Further excavation will not only bring new light on the development of society and culture of Balasore district but also the East Coast of India," a press release by OIMSEAS stated.

The archaeological excavation project followed the approval from Minister Jyotiprakash Panigrahi, Department of Odia Language Literature & Culture, Odisha Government.

The excavation was started under the guidance of Bishnupada Sethi, IAS, Principal Secretary and Ranjan Kumar Das, IAS, and under the supervision of Archaeologist Dr. Sunil Kumar Patnaik, Secretary, OIMSEAS.

2. Archaeologists Make Dramatic Discovery: A Prehistoric Human Type Previously Unknown to Science

Dramatic Discovery in Israeli Excavation

- The discovery of a new Homo group in this region, which resembles Pre-Neanderthal populations in Europe, challenges the prevailing hypothesis that Neanderthals originated from Europe, suggesting that at least some of the Neanderthals' ancestors actually came from the Levant.
- The new finding suggests that two types of Homo groups lived side by side in the Levant for more than 100,000 years (200-100,000 years ago), sharing knowledge and tool technologies: the Nesher Ramla people who lived in the region from around 400,000 years ago, and the Homo sapiens who arrived later, some 200,000 years ago.
- The new discovery also gives clues about a mystery in human evolution: How did genes of Homo sapiens penetrate the Neanderthal population that had presumably lived in Europe long before the arrival of Homo sapiens?
- The researchers claim that at least some of the later Homo fossils found previously in Israel, like those unearthed in the Skhul and Qafzeh caves, do not belong to archaic (early) Homo sapiens, but rather to groups of mixed Homo sapiens and Nesher Ramla lineage.

Nesher Ramla Homo type — a prehistoric human previously unknown to science.

Researchers from Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem have identified a new type of early human at the Nesher Ramla site, dated to 140,000 to 120,000 years ago. According to the researchers, the morphology of the Nesher Ramla humans shares features with both Neanderthals (especially the teeth and jaws) and archaic Homo (specifically the skull). At the same time, this type of Homo is very unlike modern humans — displaying a completely different skull structure, no chin, and very large teeth.

Following the study's findings, researchers believe that the Nesher Ramla Homo type is the 'source' population from which most humans of the Middle Pleistocene developed. In addition, they suggest that this group is the so-called 'missing' population that mated with Homo sapiens who arrived in the region around 200,000 years ago — about whom we know from a recent study on fossils found in the Misliya cave.

Two teams of researchers took part in the dramatic discovery, published in the prestigious Science journal: an anthropology team from Tel Aviv University headed by Prof. Israel Hershkovitz, Dr. Hila May and Dr. Rachel Sarig from the Sackler Faculty of Medicine and the Dan David Center for Human Evolution and Biohistory Research and the Shmunis Family Anthropology Institute, situated in the Steinhardt Museum at Tel Aviv University; and an archaeological team headed by Dr. Yossi Zaidner from the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Timeline: The Nesher Ramla Homo type was an ancestor of both the Neanderthals in Europe and the archaic Homo populations of Asia.

Prof. Israel Hershkovitz: "The discovery of a new type of Homo" is of great scientific importance. It enables us to make new sense of previously found human fossils, add another piece to the puzzle of

human evolution, and understand the migrations of humans in the old world. Even though they lived so long ago, in the late middle Pleistocene (474,000-130,000 years ago), the Nesher Ramla people can tell us a fascinating tale, revealing a great deal about their descendants' evolution and way of life."

The important human fossil was found by Dr. Zaidner of the Hebrew University during salvage excavations at the Nesher Ramla prehistoric site, in the mining area of the Nesher cement plant (owned by Len Blavatnik) near the city of Ramla. Digging down about 8 meters, the excavators found large quantities of animal bones, including horses, fallow deer and aurochs, as well as stone tools and human bones. An international team led by the researchers from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem identified the morphology of the bones as belonging to a new type of Homo, previously unknown to science. This is the first type of Homo to be defined in Israel, and according to common practice, it was named after the site where it was discovered — the Nesher Ramla Homo type.

Dr. Yossi Zaidner: "This is an extraordinary discovery. We had never imagined that alongside Homo sapiens, archaic Homo roamed the area so late in human history. The archaeological finds associated with human fossils show that "Nesher Ramla Homo" possessed advanced stone-tool production technologies and most likely interacted with the local Homo sapiens." The culture, way of life, and behavior of the Nesher Ramla Homo are discussed in a companion paper also published in Science journal today (June 24, 2021).

Prof. Hershkovitz adds that the discovery of the Nesher Ramla Homo type challenges the prevailing hypothesis that the Neanderthals originated in Europe. "Before these new findings," he says, "most researchers believed the Neanderthals to be a 'European story', in which small groups of Neanderthals were forced to migrate southwards to escape the spreading glaciers, with some arriving in the Land of Israel about 70,000 years ago. The Nesher Ramla fossils make

us question this theory, suggesting that the ancestors of European Neanderthals lived in the Levant as early as 400,000 years ago, repeatedly migrating westward to Europe and eastward to Asia. In fact, our findings imply that the famous Neanderthals of Western Europe are only the remnants of a much larger population that lived here in the Levant — and not the other way around."

According to Dr. Hila May, despite the absence of DNA in these fossils, the findings from Nesher Ramla offer a solution to a great mystery in the evolution of Homo: How did genes of Homo sapiens penetrate the Neanderthal population that presumably lived in Europe long before the arrival of Homo sapiens? Geneticists who studied the DNA of European Neanderthals have previously suggested the existence of a Neanderthal-like population which they called the 'missing population' or the 'X population' that had mated with Homo sapiens more than 200,000 years ago.

In the anthropological paper now published in Science, the researchers suggest that the Nesher Ramla Homo type might represent this population, heretofore missing from the record of human fossils. Moreover, the researchers propose that the humans from Nesher Ramla are not the only ones of their kind discovered in the region, and that some human fossils found previously in Israel, which have baffled anthropologists for years — like the fossils from the Tabun cave (160,000 years ago), Zuttiyeh cave (250,000), and Qesem cave (400,000) — belong to the same new human group now called the Nesher Ramla Homo type.

"People think in paradigms," says Dr. Rachel Sarig. "That's why efforts have been made to ascribe these fossils to known human groups like Homo sapiens, Homo erectus, Homo heidelbergensis, or the Neanderthals. But now we say: No. This is a group in itself, with distinct features and characteristics. At a later stage small groups of the Nesher Ramla Homo type migrated to Europe — where they evolved into the 'classic' Neanderthals that we are familiar with, and

also to Asia, where they became archaic populations with Neanderthal-like features. As a crossroads between Africa, Europe, and Asia, the Land of Israel served as a melting pot where different human populations mixed with one another, to later spread throughout the Old World. The discovery from the Nesher Ramla site writes a new and fascinating chapter in the story of humankind."

Prof. Gerhard Weber, an associate from Vienna University, argues that the story of Neanderthal evolution will be told differently after this discovery: "Europe was not the exclusive refugium of Neanderthals from where they occasionally diffused into West Asia. We think that there was much more lateral exchange in Eurasia, and that the Levant is geographically a crucial starting point, or at a least bridgehead, for this process."

3. Neanderthal and early modern human stone tool culture co-existed for over 100,000 years

Research from the University of Kent's School of Anthropology and Conservation has discovered that one of the earliest stone tool cultures, known as the Acheulean, likely persisted for tens of thousands of years longer than previously thought.

The Acheulean was estimated to have died out around 200,000 years ago but the new findings suggest it may have persisted for much longer, creating over 100,000 years of overlap with more advanced technologies produced by Neanderthals and early modern humans.

The research team, led by Dr Alastair Key (Kent) alongside Dr David Roberts (Kent) and Dr Ivan Jaric (Biology Centre of the Czech Academy of Sciences), made the discovery whilst studying stone tool records from different regions across the world. Using statistical techniques new to archaeological science, the archaeologists and

conservation experts were able to reconstruct the end of the Acheulean period and re-map the archaeological record.

Previously, a more rapid shift between the earlier Acheulean stone tool designs often associated with Homo heidelbergensis -- the common ancestor of modern humans and Neanderthals -- and more advanced 'Levallois' technologies created by early modern humans and Neanderthals, was assumed. However, the study has shed new light on the transition between these two technologies, suggesting substantial overlap between the two.

Acheulean stone tool technologies are the longest-lived cultural tradition practiced by early humans. Originating in East Africa 1.75 million years ago, handaxes and cleavers -- the stone tool types which characterise the period -- went on to be used across Africa, Europe and Asia by several different species of early human. Prior to this discovery, it was widely assumed that the Acheulean period ended between 300-150,000 year ago. However, the record was lacking in specific dates, and the timing of its demise has been heavily debated. The Kent and Czech team discovered that the tradition likely ended at different times around the world, varying from as early as 170,000 years ago in Sub-Saharan Africa through to as late as 57,000 years ago in Asia.

To understand when the Acheulean ended, the team collected information on different archaeological sites from around the world to find the latest known stone tool assemblages. A statistical technique known as optimal linear estimation -- commonly used in conservation studies to estimate species extinctions -- was used to predict how much longer the stone tool tradition continued after the most recent known sites. In effect, the technique was able to model the portion of the archaeological record yet to be discovered.

Dr Alastair Key, a Palaeolithic Archaeologist and the lead author of the study, said: "The earliest archaeological record will always be an

incomplete picture of early human behaviour, so we know that the youngest known Acheulean sites are unlikely to actually represent the final instances of these technologies being produced. By allowing us to reconstruct these missing portions of the archaeological record, this technique not only gives us a more accurate understanding of when the tradition ended, but it gives us an indication of where we can expect to find new archaeological discoveries in the future."

Dr Roberts added: "This technique was originally developed by myself and a colleague to date extinctions, as the last sighting of a species is unlikely to be the date when it actually became extinct. It is exciting to see it applied in a new context."

Their research paper 'Modelling the end of the Acheulean at global and continental levels suggests widespread persistence into the Middle Palaeolithic' is published by Humanities & Social Sciences Communications.

4. A 146,000-Year-Old Fossil Dubbed 'Dragon Man' Might Be One of Our Closest Relatives

A mysterious Middle Pleistocene skull from a Chinese well has inspired debate among paleoanthropologists

Three years ago, a Chinese farmer made an unusual donation to a university museum—a giant, nearly intact human skull with strange proportions and an unusual backstory. The man's family had been hiding the fossil since it was unearthed at a construction site in Harbin nearly 90 years ago.

After geochemical detective work to locate where the fossil was likely found, and painstaking comparison of its distinctive features with those of other early humans, some of the scientists investigating the find believe the cranium from Harbin could represent an entirely new human species—Homo longi or "Dragon Man." If so, they further suggest it might even be the human lineage most closely related to ourselves.

"The discovery of the Harbin cranium and our analyses suggest that there is a third lineage of archaic human [that] once lived in Asia, and this lineage has [a] closer relationship with H. sapiens than the Neanderthals," says Xijun Ni, a paleoanthropologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Hebei GEO University. If so, that would make the strange skull a close relative indeed since most humans today still have significant amounts of Neanderthal DNA from repeated interbreeding between our species.

Claims of a new human species are sure to cause skepticism and spark debate. But it seems that wherever the 146,000-year-old fossil falls on the human family tree, it will add to growing evidence that a fascinating and diverse period of evolution was occurring in China from about 100,000 to 500,000 years ago.

And because excavations in China haven't been as extensive as those in places like Africa, experts are only beginning to uncover the evidence.

Like its origins, the skull's 20th-century story isn't entirely clear. The family that donated the skull to co-author Ji Qiang, at Hebei GEO University's museum, had been hiding it in a well for three generations. It was unearthed in the 1930s when a railway bridge was built along the Songhua River and the family, suspecting that it was important but unsure what to do with the fossil, had safeguarded the skull ever since.

Extensive analyses of the skull began soon after it reached the museum in 2018 and resulted in three separate studies, all including Ni, that appear this week in the open-access journal The Innovation.

Direct uranium-series dating suggests the skull is at least 146,000 years old, but a lot more work was needed to attempt to put the isolated fossil into context after 90 years.

The team used X-ray fluorescence to compare the skull's chemical composition with those of other Middle Pleistocene mammal fossils discovered in the Harbin riverside area, and found them strikingly similar. An analysis of rare-earth elements, from small pieces of bone in the skull's nasal cavity also matched those of human and mammal remains from the Harbin locale found in sediments dated to 138,000 to 309,000 years ago.

A very close inspection even found sediments stuck inside the skull's nasal cavity, and their strontium isotope ratios proved a reasonable match for those found in a core that was drilled near the bridge where the skull was said to have been discovered.

Among the different skull fossils the team compared are (left to right) Peking Man (Homo erectus), Maba (Homo heidelbergensis), and some harder to classify fossils including Jinniushan, Dali and the Harbin cranium now known as 'Dragon Man.' (Kai Geng)

Observing the skull's unusual size was a far simpler matter; it's the largest of all known Homo skulls. The big cranium was able to house a brain similar in size to our own. But other features are more archaic. The skull has a thick brow, big—almost square—eye sockets and a wide mouth to hold oversized teeth. This intriguing mix of human characteristics presents a mosaic that the authors define as distinct from other Homo species—from the more primitive Homo heidelbergensis and Homo erectus to more modern humans like ourselves.

Ni says the team compared 600 different morphological characteristics of the skull across a selection of some 95 varied human skulls and mandibles. They used a set of mathematical techniques on all this data to create branching diagrams that sketch out the phylogenic relations of the different Homo species.

That analysis suggested that there were three main lineages of later Pleistocene humans, each descended from a common ancestor: H. sapiens, H. neanderthalensis and a group containing Harbin and a handful of other Chinese fossils that have proved difficult to classify including those from Dali, Jinniushan and Hualongdong.

“Our results suggest that the Harbin cranium, or Homo longi, represents a lineage that is the sister group of the H. sapiens lineage. So we say H. longi is phylogenetically closer to H. sapiens than Neanderthals are.”

The team generated biogeographic models of Middle Pleistocene human variation, illustrating how different lineages, each descended from a common ancestor, might have evolved according to the fossil record. (Ni et al. / The Innovation)

“Whether or not this skull is a valid species is certainly up for debate,” says Michael Petraglia at the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, and the Smithsonian Institution’s Human Origins Initiative.

“It’s exciting because it is a really interesting cranium, and it does have some things to say about human evolution and what’s going on in Asia. But it’s also disappointing that it’s 90 years out from discovery, and it is just an isolated cranium, and you’re not quite sure exactly how old it is or where it fits,” says Petraglia, who was not involved with the study. “The scientists do the best they can, but there’s a lot of uncertainty and missing information. So I expect a lot of reaction and controversy to this cranium.”

Chris Stringer, a study co-author from the Natural History Museum, London, doesn't necessarily agree with some of his colleagues that the skull should be classified as a distinct species. Stringer stresses the importance of genetics in establishing where species branch off from one another. He currently favors a view that the Harbin fossil and the Dali skull, a nearly complete 250,000-year-old specimen found in China's Shaanxi province which also displays an interesting mix of features, might be grouped as a different species dubbed H. daliensis. But Stringer was also enthusiastic about what can still be learned from the Harbin skull, noting that it "should also help to flesh out our knowledge of the mysterious Denisovans, and that will form part of the next stage of research."

The Denisovans, ancient humans who shared an ancestor with Neanderthals and ourselves, left behind evidence of their intimate relations with us in the DNA of modern peoples in Asia and Oceania. So far, however, little physical evidence of them has turned up, only three teeth and two small bone fragments from a Siberian cave.

Katerina Harvati is a paleoanthropologist at the University of Tübingen not associated with the study. Among her research subjects is the controversial skull from Apidima, Greece, that may or may not represent the oldest modern human ever found outside of Africa.

Harvati found the Harbin skull an intriguing mix of features previously associated with other lineages. "Middle Pleistocene human evolution is known to be extremely complex—famously called the 'muddle in the middle,'" she says. "And it has been clear for some time that the Asian human fossil record may hold the key to understanding it."

The studies of the Harbin skull, she notes, add some clarity to the picture thanks to extensive comparisons of morphological and phylogenetic analysis.

"The Harbin cranium is somewhat similar to other Asian fossils like Huanglongdong and Dali in showing unexpected combinations of features, including some previously associated with H. sapiens. The authors also identify similarities between Harbin and the (very few) known 'Denisovan 'fossils. I think that these studies help bring the evidence together and point to a distinct lineage of Asian Middle Pleistocene hominins closely related to our own lineage as well as that of Neanderthals."

A reconstruction of Dragon Man in his habitat (Chuang Zhao)

The Dragon Man appears to be a 50-something male who was likely a very large and powerful individual. The authors suggest his small hunter-gatherer community settled on a forested floodplain in a Middle Pleistocene environment that could be harsh and quite cold. The fossil is the northernmost known from the Middle Pleistocene, which may have meant that large size and a burly build were necessary adaptations.

Petraglia agreed that populations living in the region were likely pretty small and probably isolated. "Maybe that's what's creating this diversity in this group of hominins," he says, noting that Pleistocene humans are known from the rainforests of southern China to the frigid north. "They were cognitively advanced enough, or culturally innovative enough, that they could live in these extreme environments from rainforests to cold northern climates," he says.

That theory fits with an evolutionary picture in which smaller populations evolve in isolation, intermittently expand over time and mix with others and then separate again into smaller groups that continue to adapt to their localized environments before again meeting and breeding with other groups.

The Harbin skull's recent emergence, after thousands of years buried on a riverside and nearly a century hidden down a well, adds another intriguing piece to China's Middle Pleistocene puzzle. It joins a

number of other enigmatic fossils from populations that have resisted any easy identification, thought to have lived in transition between H. Erectus and H. sapiens.

"How do they fit in terms of their evolutionary relationships, to what degree are they interbreeding with the populations across Eurasia, and to what degree do they become isolated resulting in their distinctive features?" Petraglia asks. "This brings up a lot of interesting questions and in human evolution China is still really a great unknown."

5. Evolutionary Anthropology in the Time of COVID-19

We are in the midst of a global crisis and a national reckoning. As we move toward then end of our pandemic summer, with countries opening back up and protests sparking worldwide as folks fight for the right of Black communities to live freely without fear and prejudice, one can question what these tumultuous events mean for the future of our species. I had the chance to speak with Agustín Fuentes, former chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Notre Dame and incoming professor to the Anthropology Department at Princeton University, about this very question. I wanted to know his take on the evolutionary processes of SARS-COV2 and the impacts of COVID-19, but also what he sees our role is as anthropologists during this crisis.

Pandemics and the evolutionary process

Fuentes makes clear that pandemics, in the contemporary context and as we experience them now, are extremely recent in our evolutionary history. Our current experience of population, group, and co-residential densities as well as the particular kinds of multispecies relationships that come together to facilitate pandemics at this scale are a relatively recent phenomena when looking across evolutionary

time. Fuentes instead suggests that the question we should be asking is, How are pandemics changing?

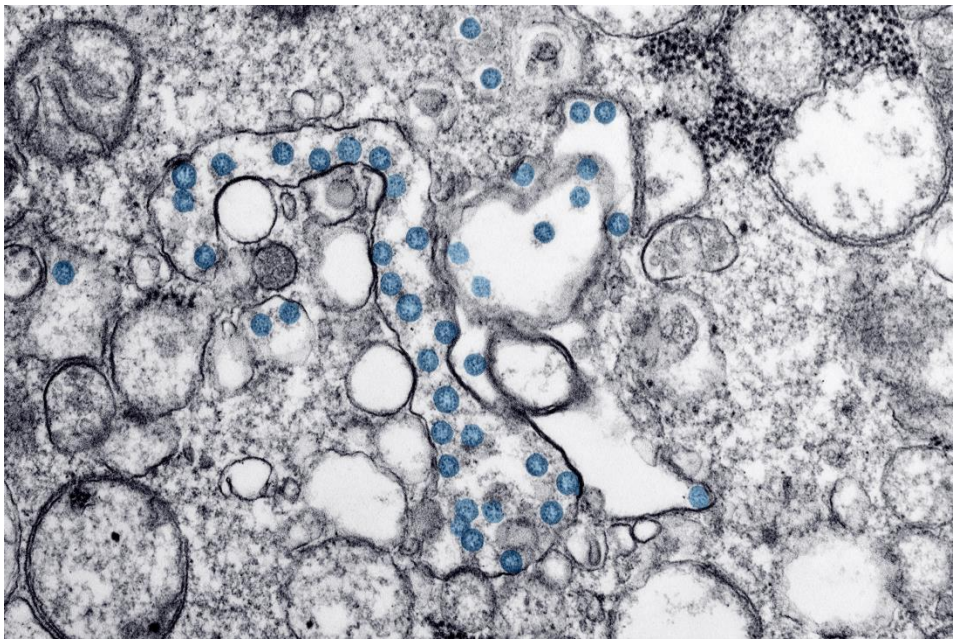

Image description: Circular blue objects with small black dots on them cluster together among black and white surroundings.

Caption: Transmission electron microscopic image of an isolate from the first US case of COVID-19, formerly known as 2019-nCoV. The spherical viral particles, colorized blue, contain cross-section through the viral genome, seen as black dots. CDC Public Health Image Library

Only recently, evolutionarily, have we had the population numbers, densities, and social, cultural, ecological, and economic-political practices that facilitate the emergence of pandemics like that of COVID-19. We can instead look at if pandemics are going to shift evolutionary processes—a question that can only be answered by thinking about it on multiple levels. The extended evolutionary synthesis (EES) is an ideal tool to look at this. Fuentes comments that when thinking of evolutionary processes, one immediately thinks of

the selective effects of SARS-COV2 and its resultant disease (i.e. natural selection). However, he argues that selection impacts are likely fairly minimal in a traditional sense, because those of post-reproductive age, such as the elderly, tend to be most at risk. But, this does not mean that evolutionary processes are not impacted; Fuentes points out that, in fact, what the viral impact and its pathological effects on humans is actually doing is radically altering behavioral and ecological profiles restructuring the contemporary niche, which has critical downstream effects on health, reproduction, and psychological well-being.

It is imperative that we see this pandemic as a biosocial event.

So instead, we can now ask how is the pandemic reshaping the way in which dynamic processes are occurring in the human niche? He gives the example, social interaction: social interactions are critical to healthy functioning and absolutely necessary for reproductive output, but they have been radically restrained through practices such as physical distancing, isolation, and quarantine. One could argue that this sort of change in the social niche has impacted the individual, not so much from the actual physiological morbidity or mortality of the virus, but from the broad scale social, political, and economic changes happening, and even the perceptions of risk, could be radically altering behavior and bodies.

He remarks that there is probably enormous variation in how human bodies are responding to this viral load, which is not necessarily being selected for or against, though the of impact on morbidity and mortality is also highly variable. Fuentes argues that this is because all of this is in the context of systemic processes of violence from racism, colonialism, and the variety of other contexts which have resulted in embodied developmental trajectories and impacts that predispose entire populations or large segments of populations to a much higher risk of morbidity from the same viral infection and the same viral

load. He asserts that in this pandemic, what we are experiencing is not just a biological phenomenon, but also a social one.

A biosocial phenomena

It is imperative that we see this pandemic as a biosocial event. Though SARS-COV2 is a biological entity that has specific biological, deleterious, pathological impacts on the human respiratory system (among others), the biological information is meaningless without the social, historical, political, and economic context. Fuentes gives the example of hand washing. If you understand the structure of the coronavirus, you would see how just some soap and water lifts the outer layers and can save billions of people. But that knowledge of biology is completely useless when there is no access to running water like in a refugee camp or a homeless encampment, or even in some of the Indigenous reservations here in the United States.

SOCIO – CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Five big ways in which the covid crisis might change us as people

What sort of a society will we inherit from the covid-19 pandemic? On the surface, it would possibly look more or less the same—after all, we are not going to go around wearing masks for the rest of our lives, and it is highly unlikely that even families that can afford it will all invest in another home specifically so that spouses can take a break from each other whenever prolonged physical proximity gets a bit hard to handle. But there will certainly be deeper and more subtle changes, and we probably won't even notice, till some alert sociologists start pointing them out a few years from now, and their TED talks go viral.

So, as someone who has been mostly working from home for 10 years, with a limited social life, let me make five predictions.

One, we will emerge a society with a much higher level of distrust. Today, the suddenly-awakened fear of mortality is leading people to keep a close watch on one another. Neighbours are calling the police to report on families not strictly following behavioural guidelines. For many of us, the spectre of inevitable—and massive—job losses has increased insecurity more than at any time in our lives. Most people will possibly carry that distrust, suspicion and insecurity—at a conscious or subconscious level—with them as long as they live. We will trust everyone less, whether it's people or institutions. This leads me to the next prediction.

Fear exposes the core personas of people. Our interactions with friends and acquaintances during this period, even if they are just on WhatsApp groups, would give us rare insights into their real selves—how selfish or altruistic they are, how fragile or tough, how narrow-minded or unbiased, how courageous or cowardly, and how reliable. Without doubt, we will have a much better sense of whom we can count on in times of need, and who our true friends are. A crisis is always a sieve—it separates the greedy and self-obsessed from the kind and generous. A harsh lockdown reveals whom we want to talk to, whose company we miss, and whose we don't. We also now know who the people are that fecklessly lie about their travel histories, or ostracize health workers and airline crew members, or see a disease as a stigma. We will recalibrate our relationships based on insights gained under a looming threat. Many of us will end up with fewer friends, but they will all be real friends.

Three, we have all suddenly been exposed to the randomness of the universe, what philosopher-writer Albert Camus called the "absurdity of existence". A direct result of this will be more religiosity. More than ever, a lot of us would want something to lean on, and I certainly will

not be surprised if displays of religious devotion become more frequent and widespread.

Just count the number of messages on your phone over the last few weeks that mention prayer and praying. When we finally come out of all this, some people—including former non-believers—will want to thank their gods fervently for letting them come through unscathed, and the less fortunate will also find solace in acknowledging and surrendering to the perceived higher powers. The number of people who prefer “spirituality" to religion will also see a jump.

Four, for those of us who employ domestic helps (which, I suppose, includes almost all Indians reading this), nothing has woken us up quite like covid-19 to the importance of the services we have been taking for granted in our daily lives. Once the lockdown lifts and our helps return to our homes again, we will respect them much more. The same for sanitation workers and other people whom many of us rarely paid attention to. This will be something very positive to come out of this crisis and could have long-term implications, especially in a class-ridden society like India. At the same time, many of us would have been working to get more autonomy over the daily mundane tasks of our lives. This is also good. And by the way, a litmus test of whom we should consider worthy of our friendship should be whether someone who can afford to has been paying their domestic help when he/she is unable to come to work.

Five, we may—just may—actually emerge as a kinder and gentler society. After all, if we have failed to notice that a virus does not distinguish between a Hollywood star and a slum dweller, and if that has not made us slightly more humble, then we may have failed as a species. If we haven’t been delighted by the sight of dolphins playing in the waters off Marine Drive in Mumbai or peacocks perched on parked cars in concrete jungles, we are truly irredeemable creatures.

We have seen heroes emerge during this crisis, ordinary people rising to the occasion and doing whatever is within their powers to alleviate suffering, out of genuine compassion and with nothing to gain. Perhaps this crisis will make us more responsible and thoughtful beings. We certainly have the brains to be so.

I have friends who believe that this chaos will give birth to a new age of healing and harmony. I do not suffer from such wishful thinking, but I know that this pandemic is a huge reality check for humanity. And reality checks are generally beneficial.

2. Modern human brains evolved much more recently than thought

Modern brains are younger than originally thought, possibly developing as recently as 1.5 million years ago, according to a study published Thursday. By that time, the earliest humans had already begun walking on two feet and had started fanning out from Africa.

Our first ancestors from the genus Homo emerged on the continent about 2.5 million years ago with primitive, apelike brains about half the size of those seen in today's humans.

Scientists have been trying to solve a mystery for as long as our origin story has been known: Exactly when and where did the brain evolve into something that made us human?

"People had thought that these humanlike brains evolved actually at the very beginning of the genus Homo, so about 2.5 million years ago," paleoanthropologist Christoph Zollikofer, a co-author of the study published in the journal Science, told AFP.

Zollikofer and lead study author Marcia Ponce de Leon examined skull fossils from Africa, Georgia and the Indonesian island of Java

and discovered the evolution took place much later, between 1.7 million and 1.5 million years ago.

Since brains themselves do not fossilize, the only way to observe their evolution is to study the marks they leave inside the skull.

The scientists created virtual images, known as endocasts, of what had filled the skulls long ago.

In humans, the Broca area, part of the frontal lobe linked to speech production, is much bigger than the corresponding zone in other great apes, said Zollikofer of the University of Zurich.

The expansion of an area results in the shifting of everything behind it.

"This backward shift can be seen on the fossil endocasts, when we track imprints of the brain fissures," Zollikofer said.

'Surprise'

By studying skulls from Africa, the researchers were able to determine that the oldest ones, dating back more than 1.7 million years, had a frontal lobe characteristic of great apes.

"This first result was a big surprise," Zollikofer said.

It signified that the genus Homo "started with bipedalism," or walking on two legs, and that the evolution of the brain had nothing to do with being bipedal.

"Now we know that in our long evolutionary history … the first representatives of our genus Homo were just terrestrial bipeds, with apelike brains," the paleoanthropologist said.

However, the youngest African fossils, dating back 1.5 million years, showed characteristics of modern human brains.

This signified that the evolution of the brain took place between the two dates, in Africa, according to the study.

The conclusion is backed up by the appearance of more complex tools during this same period, called Acheulean tools, which have two symmetrical faces.

"This is not random coincidence," Zollikofer said, "because we know those brain areas that get expanded in this time period are those that are used for complex manipulative tasks like tool-making."

Two migrations from Africa

The second surprising result of the study comes from observations of five skull fossils found in present-day Georgia, dating between 1.8 and 1.7 million years ago.

The particularly well-preserved specimens proved to be primitive brains.

"People thought you need a big modern brain to disperse out of Africa," Zollikofer said. "We can show these brains are not big, and they are not modern, and still people have been able to leave Africa."

Meanwhile, fossils from Java, the youngest specimens in the study, showed modern brain characteristics. The researchers therefore believe that there was a second migration out of Africa.

"So, you have a spray first of primitive-brained people, then things evolve to a modern brain in Africa, and these people sprayed again," Zollikofer said.

"It's not a new hypothesis … but there was no clear evidence. And now for the first time, we have real fossil evidence."

3. Incentives for inter-caste marriages may help curb atrocities on Dalits: Parliament panel

NEW DELHI: With inter-caste marriages involving a Dalit spouse rising last year, a parliamentary committee believes that schemes like the one incentivising such wedlocks may be the way to curb the high rate of atrocities against the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The panel's recommendation comes in the backdrop of the paradox that while there has been an increase in inter-caste marriages involving SCs, crimes against the SCs/STs remain high. As a result, the panel believes that schemes that promote "social integration and harmony and remove practice of untouchability and caste-based discrimination" should be implemented in states where atrocities are high.

The central scheme — "incentive for inter-caste marriage" — reported an increase last year. While 17,263 claims were made in 2016-17, it went up to 20,253 in 2017-18 and further up to 23,355 in 2019-20. Under the scheme, cash incentive is provided to every couple in which one spouse is SC.

The parliamentary standing committee on social justice and empowerment headed by BJP MP Rama Devi, in its report on Demand for Grants for 2021-22, has expressed its dismay at the fact that despite all the laws and programmes to beat the scourge of untouchability, cases of atrocities remain high.

Noting that as per NCRB, 2,02,427 atrocity cases against SCs and 33949 cases against STs were registered between 2015-2019, the panel said, "Unfortunately, this figure may actually be higher as several cases go unreported. The committee feel that sincere efforts at the execution level to create awareness as well as sensitise people to come out of their prejudices and bias against the SCs and create an equal society, are urgently required. Some of the states still have a glaring

number of atrocity cases despite prevailing laws."
In the context of fighting prejudices against SCs, the panel cited the example of the central scheme that provides cash support for marriage between an SC and a non-SC.
"In line with the existing scheme for incentivising inter-caste marriages, more schemes are required to be introduced, particularly by the governments of those states where a very large number of cases (atrocities) are reported, with proper monitoring mechanism to promote social integration and harmony, and remove practice of untouchability and caste-based discrimination," it recommended.

4. Culture drives human evolution more than genetics

Summary:

Researchers found that culture helps humans adapt to their environment and overcome challenges better and faster than genetics. Tim Waring and Zach Wood found that humans are experiencing a 'special evolutionary transition' in which the importance of culture is surpassing the value of genes as the primary driver of human evolution. Due to the group-orientated nature of culture, they also concluded that human evolution itself is becoming more group-oriented.

In a new study, University of Maine researchers found that culture helps humans adapt to their environment and overcome challenges better and faster than genetics.

After conducting an extensive review of the literature and evidence of long-term human evolution, scientists Tim Waring and Zach Wood concluded that humans are experiencing a "special evolutionary transition" in which the importance of culture, such as learned knowledge, practices and skills, is surpassing the value of genes as the primary driver of human evolution.

Culture is an under-appreciated factor in human evolution, Waring says. Like genes, culture helps people adjust to their environment and meet the challenges of survival and reproduction. Culture, however, does so more effectively than genes because the transfer of knowledge is faster and more flexible than the inheritance of genes, according to Waring and Wood.

Culture is a stronger mechanism of adaptation for a couple of reasons, Waring says. It's faster: gene transfer occurs only once a generation, while cultural practices can be rapidly learned and frequently updated. Culture is also more flexible than genes: gene transfer is rigid and limited to the genetic information of two parents, while cultural transmission is based on flexible human learning and effectively unlimited with the ability to make use of information from peers and experts far beyond parents. As a result, cultural evolution is a stronger type of adaptation than old genetics.

Waring, an associate professor of social-ecological systems modeling, and Wood, a postdoctoral research associate with the School of Biology and Ecology, have just published their findings in a literature review in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B, the flagship biological research journal of The Royal Society in London.

"This research explains why humans are such a unique species. We evolve both genetically and culturally over time, but we are slowly becoming ever more cultural and ever less genetic," Waring says.

Culture has influenced how humans survive and evolve for millenia. According to Waring and Wood, the combination of both culture and genes has fueled several key adaptations in humans such as reduced aggression, cooperative inclinations, collaborative abilities and the capacity for social learning. Increasingly, the researchers suggest, human adaptations are steered by culture, and require genes to accommodate.

Waring and Wood say culture is also special in one important way: it is strongly group-oriented. Factors like conformity, social identity and shared norms and institutions -- factors that have no genetic equivalent -- make cultural evolution very group-oriented, according to researchers. Therefore, competition between culturally organized groups propels adaptations such as new cooperative norms and social systems that help groups survive better together.

According to researchers, "culturally organized groups appear to solve adaptive problems more readily than individuals, through the compounding value of social learning and cultural transmission in groups." Cultural adaptations may also occur faster in larger groups than in small ones.

With groups primarily driving culture and culture now fueling human evolution more than genetics, Waring and Wood found that evolution itself has become more group-oriented.

"In the very long term, we suggest that humans are evolving from individual genetic organisms to cultural groups which function as superorganisms, similar to ant colonies and beehives," Waring says. "The 'society as organism' metaphor is not so metaphorical after all. This insight can help society better understand how individuals can fit into a well-organized and mutually beneficial system. Take the coronavirus pandemic, for example. An effective national epidemic response program is truly a national immune system, and we can therefore learn directly from how immune systems work to improve our COVID response."

INDIAN & TRIBAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. 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.

2. Fearing exclusion of smartphone-less tribals, Jharkhand seeks to use own app for vaccination

It has been made mandatory for people in the 18-45 age group to register themselves at Co-WIN to get the vaccine.

RANCHI: Fearing exclusion of a large chunk of the tribal people in the ongoing vaccination drive against Covid-19 due to non-availability of smartphones among many of them and access to internet in remote areas, the Jharkhand government wants to use its own "more user-friendly" app for registration. It has been made mandatory for people in the 18-45 age group to register themselves at Co-WIN to get the vaccine

Jharkhand government officials, however, said that JHAR-WIN, the state's app, has an edge over Co-Win in many ways and it is suited for a state where a large number of people are poor tribals living in villages. The JHAR-WIN app works both online and offline and is backed up with a call centre to facilitate registration of low-digitally literate population group and can provide on the spot registration at vaccination centres, officials said.

Considering the issue of non-delivery of SMS/OTP and to make it more user-friendly, OTP authentication has been removed in JHAR-WIN which is available in both English and Hindi, they said. "The Co-WIN platform and the process of registration by design perpetuate digital exclusion and inequality especially in a state like Jharkhand. With a high tribal and marginal population mostly in rural areas and the rising threat of the virus in villages, it is necessary to ensure no one is left out, an official in the Chief Minister's Office told PTI. Jharkhand has one of the largest tribal populations in the country inhabited by over 32 Schedule Tribes and other marginalised indigenous people.

According to the 2011 census, the state has 86.45 lakh tribal people, 27 per cent of the total population of 3.29 crore. "The state's application/portal with a dedicated call centre and help desk will ensure each person is included irrespective of digital literacy or skill,"

the CMO official said. The Jharkhand government has filed a plea in the Supreme Court praying for a direction to the Centre to allow the state to use its own app and portal for registration for Covid-19 vaccination, the official said.

The official said that following the commencement of Phase 3 vaccination for the 18-45 years age group, Jharkhand is facing a major difficulty in registering potential beneficiaries as there are issues of digital literacy and digital exclusion, apart from glitches in the portal especially in rural areas. Unlike Co-WIN where slot booking is made mandatory for getting the jab, JHAR-WIN allows a person to directly reach the nearest vaccination centre and avail facility, the official said. The option for walk-in, as was available in case of vaccination for 45 years plus population, is not there for the age group of 18-45 years which comprises approximately 1.4 crore in Jharkhand.

The state says that its application for registration for vaccination is user-friendly, more practical and best suited for Jharkhand as its scheduled areas have seen low human development indices, backwardness, remoteness and poverty, and social indicators in its tribal pockets are inferior to the state average. "Being a state with heavy forest cover and tough terrain, Jharkhand has many villages that comes under network shadow area. Unlike Co-WIN, Jharkhand's State Portal (http://amritvahini.in) will support people in the remotest of the areas irrespective of network connectivity. "Rural and tribal population of the state can easily reach vaccination centres and get benefits of it with the same ease as urban population making 'vaccination for all' true in both letter and spirit," the official added.

Unlike Co-WIN that mandates Captcha authentication which is image-based and requires a good internet connection and a tech-savvy person, Jharkhand's state portal has removed it making it faster and easy to use, he said. Battling a sharp surge in COVID-19 cases during the second wave, the state government has extended the lockdown till May 27. The state continued to show easing of coronavirus rage with

the state reporting 60 new COVID deaths and 2,056 positive cases on Friday, a health department bulletin said. The total fatalities have risen to 4,714, while the state's caseload spiked to 3,24,884.

Till four-five days back, the state was logging more than 100 casualties due to coronavirus and around 5000 infections daily. The recovery rate among coronavirus patients in the state now stands at 90.38 per cent, better than the national average of 86.70 per cent. Capital Ranchi which has been struggling with a high number of cases saw 14 deaths while East Singhbhum which has also been consistently recording high fatalities reported eight deaths. No deaths have been reported from Dumka, Latehar, Pakur and Simdega during the last 24 hours, the bulletin said.

The mineral-rich state now has 26,511 active COVID-19 cases, while 2,93,659 patients have recovered from the infection, it said. Fatalities in Bokaro were recorded at 9 during the last 24 hours while four deaths were recorded from Khunti. Giridih and Godda saw three deaths each during the last 24 hours. Dhanbad, Garhwa, Gumla, Hazaribag and Jamtara recorded two deaths each while one death each was recorded in Chatra, Deoghar, Koderma, Lohardaga, Palamu, Ramgarh, Sahebganj, Sariakela and West Sinbhum.

Battling a sharp surge in COVID-19 cases during the second wave, the state government has extended the lockdown till May 27. Restrictions with stricter provisions, including seven days mandatory quarantine for people visiting the state, are now in place. Altogether, 79,44,728 samples have been tested for COVID-19 in Jharkhand thus far, including 50,504 since Thursday, it added. The mortality rate in the state remained higher at 1.45 per cent as against the nation's 1.10 per cent.

Battling a severe second wave of COVID-19 pandemic, the Jharkhand government has set up a task force at block level to map and more effectively contain the virus. Adopting a multi-pronged strategy, it

began the massive public health survey exercise Wednesday which will be carried out till May 25. In a bid to protect its citizens from the deadly virus, the Jharkhand government had on May 14 launched a free vaccination drive for people in the age group of 18 to 44 years.

3. Covid-19 seeps into Kerala's tribal areas, but Edamalakkudy keeps itself safe

Its feat is a result of tight restrictions on the entry and exit to the village by the tribal councils, high awareness within the community about the dangers of the virus and the interventions by government departments to protect the tribe.

In its second wave, the Covid-19 pandemic has made deeper inroads into Kerala's vulnerable tribal communities, both in terms of cases and fatalities, as compared to the first wave last year. But successfully resisting the second wave, which was brought on by a highly

transmissible variant of the virus, is Edamalakkudy, the first tribal hamlet in the state to get local body status in 2010.

Buried in the deep forests of the Western Ghats, Edamalakkudy, a cluster of 26 settlements populated by the Muthuvan Tribe with nearly 2500 inhabitants, has managed to remain an oasis of calm, having reported not a single case of Covid-19 since the pandemic began. Its feat is a result of tight restrictions on the entry and exit to the village by the tribal councils, high awareness within the community about the dangers of the virus and the interventions by government departments to protect the tribe.

“Right at the start of the pandemic, the tribals (after a meeting with government officials) decided that no one would enter or leave the village without permission. To bring essential food supplies, one or two persons they approve would go to the nearest town. Upon return, they would enter quarantine for 14 days,” said Dr Priya N, district medical officer, Idukki.

“On our part, before sending our staff to Edamalakkudy, we subject them to RT-PCR testing. Only those testing negative are allowed to go. So, under any circumstances, there’s no chance for social mingling (with someone potentially carrying the virus). That’s why no cases have been reported so far,” she added.

The remoteness of Edamalakkudy has also been a factor. Visitors to the village have to traverse a long forest path, serviceable solely by jeeps and extremely difficult to navigate in the rainy season. The presence of wild animals makes night travel out of the question.

The hamlet lies 18 km from Pettimudi, the nearest settlement, and 41 km from Munnar, the closest big town with a semblance of healthcare facilities.

Harindra Kumar S, range forest officer, Munnar, said, “On the request of the tribals at the start of the lockdown last year, we had closed the

only motorable road from Pettimudi, ensuring that nobody gets in. We shut forest paths from Mankulam, Valparai and 9th block too from the Tamil Nadu side. Our watchers and staff who live in Edamalakkudy have also helped in spreading awareness."

The resistance against the virus is especially remarkable for Edamalakkudy considering the fact that its residents participated in two democratic exercises in the last six months — the local body elections in December last year and the Assembly elections in April. Though the election campaigns were widely said to be responsible for Kerala's surge in infections, in Edamalakkudy, it made no difference to the status quo.

Being a green zone has other advantages too. The primary school students in the hamlet have the rare opportunity to attend classes in person, without fear. In any case, the absence of internet connectivity would have made virtual classes impossible.The district administration is now moving quickly to shield tribal communities from the virus by administering them vaccine. The state government has already ordered all above the age of 18 in tribal colonies to be inoculated as quickly as possible.

4. Who are the Tharu tribals of the UP terai whose home and land the govt wants to open to tourists?

The government's intention is to put Tharu villages on the tourism map, and to create jobs and bring economic independence for the tribal population.

The Uttar Pradesh government has recently embarked upon a scheme to take the unique culture of its ethnic Tharu tribe across the world. The intention is to put Tharu villages on the tourism map, and to create jobs and bring economic independence to the tribal population.

What is this scheme about?

The state government is working to connect Tharu villages in the districts of Balrampur, Bahraich, Lakhimpur and Pilibhit bordering Nepal, with the home stay scheme of the UP Forest Department. The idea is to offer tourists an experience of living in the natural Tharu habitat, in traditional huts made of grass collected mainly from the forests.

The Uttar Pradesh Forest Corporation will train the Tharu people to communicate effectively with visitors, and encourage villagers to acquaint them with aspects of safety and cleanliness, and with the rules of the forest.

Tharu homeowners will be able to charge tourists directly for the accommodation and home-cooked meals. The UP government expects both domestic and international tourists to avail of the opportunity to obtain a taste of the special Tharu culture by staying with them, observing their lifestyle, food habits, and attire.

The homestay scheme will be expanded to include the Tharu villages in a few weeks' time, according to Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Eva Sharma.

Who exactly are the Tharu people?

The community belongs to the Terai lowlands, amid the Shivaliks or lower Himalayas. Most of them are forest dwellers, and some practice agriculture. The word tharu is believed to be derived from sthavir, meaning followers of Theravada Buddhism.

The Tharus live in both India and Nepal. In the Indian terai, they live mostly in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. According to the 2011 census, the Scheduled Tribe population in Uttar Pradesh was more than 11 lakh; this number is estimated to have crossed 20 lakh now.

The biggest chunk of this tribal population is made up of Tharus. Members of the tribe survive on wheat, corn and vegetables grown close to their homes. A majority still lives off the forest.

What is unusual about the Tharu language, food, and culture?

They speak various dialects of Tharu, a language of the Indo-Aryan subgroup, and variants of Hindi, Urdu, and Awadhi. In central Nepal, they speak a variant of Bhojpuri, while in eastern Nepal, they speak a variant of Maithili.

Tharus worship Lord Shiva as Mahadev, and call their supreme being "Narayan", who they believe is the provider of sunshine, rain, and harvests. Tharu women have stronger property rights than is allowed to women in mainstream North Indian Hindu custom.

Most Tharu tribals consume alcoholic beverages, and some eat beef. Standard items on the Tharu plate are bagiya or dhikri – which is a steamed dish of rice flour that is eaten with chutney or curry – and ghonghi, an edible snail that is cooked in a curry made of coriander, chili, garlic, and onion.

5. Kalahandi's Kutia Kondhs: Subsistence a struggle for this tribe of nature worshippers

Despite living in abject poverty and depending on natural resources for survival, the Kondhs do not use wood from the forests for fuel and also prevent illegal tree

The Kutia Kondhs are a particularly vulnerable tribal groups in Kalahandi district, Odisha. They live in Lanjigarh, Thuamul Rampur, Madanpur Rampur and Bhawanipatna blocks.

The Kondhs worship nature like many other tribal groups in the country. Members of the community take turns to protect forests and wildlife that surround their houses.

Despite living in abject poverty and depending on natural resources for survival, the Kondhs do not use wood from the forests for fuel and also prevent illegal tree.

In Lanjigarh, where over 90 per cent residents are Kondhs, every sixth household experiences severe food insecurity and hunger.

Apart from hunger, the tribe faces several other development challenges such as illiteracy; lack of access to basic services like schools, health, nutrition, employment, land ownership; low agricultural production, lack of institutional credit and access to non-timber forest produce (NTFP).

Society and culture

Every tribal community has a distinct way of life, majorly depending on nature and natural resources. Inter-generational poverty is a reality among tribal communities.

A typical kutia Kondh settlement has two rows of houses facing each other spread over a rectangular space. Living for the day and thinking little for their future is a way of life for them. They have limited interactions with people outside their tribe or the government.

The social structure is well-organised and unified in a Kondh settlement and co-operation is remarkable. The families are mostly nuclear and patriarchal in character.

Women, however, play a relatively big role in the collection, processing and sale of non-timber forest produce. In addition to housekeeping and child care, female members across age groups perform most of the domestic work except fuel wood collection.

Adolescent females of the tribe usually live separately from the rest of the members at 'youth dormitories'. The practice, however, is gradually losing importance.

A few primary schools have come up in these villages due to government intervention and the current batch of students in these schools is the first generation of learners in the community. Efforts by

the government and welfare organisations have also resulted in the gradual transformation of the community's social life and infrastructure.

Agriculture and animal husbandry

Shifting cultivation, or slash-and-burn agriculture, is the primary source of food for the tribal communities in the area. The Kondhs call it dongar chaas or podu chaas.
The major crops cultivated in the shifting cultivation system are minor millets like ragi (finger millet), kosala, kangu with arhar as an intercrop.

These crops are cultivated during the Kharif season (June to September). The average size of podu landholdings is 0.5-3 acres along hill slopes. No manure or chemical fertilizers are used by Kondh farmers in the shifting cultivation system.

About 68 per cent of the households have marginal and small landholdings, 10 per cent have medium and large landholdings and the rest are landless. With increase in population and family size, the lands are further fragmented. The average holding size is 0.8-1.2 acres with a few farmers holding more than 3 acres.

Collection and sale of NTFPs, casual labour and remittances from migrants are primary sources of income other than agriculture. They also earn a living by selling livestock. Distress sale of livestock is fairly common.

Wages from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme provides the mainstay for many households. Poor households belonging to old people, widows and persons with disability receive monthly pensions.

On an average, the annual income from all sources for a tribal household ranges between Rs 15,000-30,000. Most of the households

have an average debt of Rs 5,000-8,000 to friends, relatives and money lenders. Fluid cash is completely missing in most households.

The most migrations take place between July-August and November-December when the community waits to harvest. These are food-scarce months.

A majority of the migrants move to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to work in brick kilns and to Kerala to work in stone-crushing units, rubber and tea plantations.

Remittances ranging between Rs 3,000 and Rs 12,000 are sent by migrant family members and are used for buying basic provisions by the family left behind. Last year's lockdown to curb the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic prevented many migrant workers from returning to their villages, stripping their families of even this measly income.

Animal husbandry constitutes a major source of livelihood as well as a source of dietary protein. The Kondhs rear cows and chicks for their consumption while goats and sheep are reared mainly for the market.

NTFP, the lifeline

The tribal communities depend critically on natural resources like forest, water and land for their livelihoods. They collect different forest produce such as edible leaves, wild tubers, mushrooms, bamboo shoots and wild fruits and berries for consumption.

A majority of the tribal households are dependent on the forest for two-three months a year for collection of NTFPs they consume and sell.

Landless people sell Siali leaves (Bauhinia vahlii) and sal leaves to buy food. Due to rapid deforestation over the last two decades, there has

been a decline in NTFPs like mahua, tamarind, mangoes, kendu, jackfruit, amla, harida.

Barada saag (Bauhinia variegata), char, ber, kardi, many varieties of tubers, wild fruits, mushrooms, berries, flowers, resins and gums continue to be the lifeline.
Limited access to NTPFs and wild food plants and greens from the forest contributes to low dietary diversity and incomes of tribal households.

Many species of medicinal herbs and plants are collected by tribal women and men to cater to their medicinal requirements.

Deteriorating soil quality has also led to decrease in yield for tubers, NTFPs and other medicinal plants.

Nutrition and sanitation

Hidden hunger and starvation-like situations are endemic to Lanjigarh block, where almost a quarter of the district's Kondhs live. Here, the tribal people are constantly living in hunger for almost eight months in a year.

The community diet is primarily carbohydrate-rich mandia pej (ragi gruel) with very little diversity, or rice with salt, tamarind water and green chillies. Only a few households are able to afford pulses and vegetables.

Women, especially single women, widows, old people without care givers, infirm, people with disability and children are the most vulnerable groups facing chronic hunger and food insecurity for almost five months in a year.

The poorest households avail government scheme top distribute rice at Re 1 a kilo troughout the year and ensure part of their household level food security and survival.

Anaemia rates are precariously high among adolescent girls and women (over 68 per cent in Lanjigarh block). The rate of child malnutrition is high in Lanjigarh block with 43.5 per cent underweight, 47.9 per cent stunted and 20 per cent wasted children. Prevalence of nutritional anaemia in children under five years is 74.3 per cent and in pregnant women is 49.7 per cent.

Most households practice open defecation. Drinking water especially during the summer months is a problem in most tribal settlements due to drying up of tube wells.

6.The Nation Can Learn Lessons On Sustainability From Marginalised Tribal Communities

The systematic methods of locality drainage systems, crop rotational farming, rainwater harvesting, usage of earthen utensils and other rational methods have been practised in every tribal household for thousands of years. They have only conveniently, yet, sustainably

updated themselves without causing much harm to the world's ecological balance.

For several years, tribal communities of the country have co-lived and protected nature and it is high time the world takes note of sustainability from them.

The Santhals of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh; the Garo Khasi tribes of North East India; the Kamar tribe of Madhya Pradesh; the Kadar, Karumba tribes of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have all left a steady trail of reference of how-to-live in peace with nature dexterously.

Santhals, till date, use earthen utensils, live in mud huts which are cooler than concrete houses, are pantheists and have nature involved in every minute cultural expression, from their dance to marriages. They use organic elements like fresh flowers and leaves to adorn themselves with.

"We hold nature at the highest, our life revolves around trees, crops; our festivals, religion everything is related to nature; we cannot dare to harm it," said Shefali Hasda, a dancer from Bolpur, from the Santhal Community.

Ethnic groups in northeastern states have incorporated methods of farming, infrastructure building, re-using of resources in the most effective way. Their crop rotation and step farming methods prevent soil erosion and degradation. They re-use residues of wasted crops as dry ingredients for earthen ovens, which is a financially feasible option, especially in poorer areas.

Tribal communities in central India use hay to construct houses, shacks which are easily degradable. They also have effective ways of rainwater harvesting, especially during dry seasons.

For the longest time, one was under the presumption that civilisation wouldn't run out of water, but a NITI Aayog report released in 2018 predicted Day Zero for 21 Indian cities by the end of a couple of years. Day Zero refers to the day when a place is likely to have no drinking water of its own.

Communities in southern India use banana leaves very commonly for cooking and other household purposes. This usage of banana leaves is now gaining popularity in northern states as well, especially during occasions for feeding guests. "Wedding business in our country is undeniably a capitalist concept and we as planners are glad that some couples are aiming for sustainable décor, not just sourcing locally but employing locally as well," says Nikhil Roy, a Wedding Planner based in Durgapur.

The country faces multiple ecological problems at the moment, be it the breaking up of the Nanda Devi Glacier in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district or the earthquakes happening spasmodically; what the country needs right now is an extensive understanding and usage of alternatives in the most sustainable way possible.

The awareness of living a more conscious, kind and greener life is what the world needs right now.

7. Royal Past & Islamic Matrilineal Kinship: Lakshadweep's Rich History Has Always Left Chroniclers At Sea

Opposition parties in Lakshadweep and Kerala are up in arms against various measures initiated by the Administrator of the group of islands, terming them as “anti-people" and have sought his recall. However, this is not the first time that Lakshwadweep has made it to the headlines. The archipelago’s history has forever been interesting.

Why is Lakshadweep often linked to Islam and matrilineal kinship?

According to Census 2011, the Muslim community constitutes 96.58 per cent of Lakshadweep’s population. The social structure is based on matrilineal kinship. Contrary to the prevalent societal system, matriliny adheres to a system in which ancestral descent is traced through maternal instead of paternal lines.

Most people of Lakshadweep are descendants of migrants from the Malabar Coast of southwest India and the islanders are ethnically similar to coastal Kerala’s Malayali community.

How did Islam and matriliny set afoot in the archipelago?

According to the Journal of South Asian Studies published online by Cambridge University Press in September 2017, the acceptance of Islam by local populations took place between the 8th and 15th centuries when trade in the Indian Ocean was dominated by Muslims.

Islam represented one of the factors for the unity of the Indian Ocean, but the spread of Islam was not even or consistent; nor were Muslims - the only traders in this ocean. These sea routes linked the Red Sea coast, the Persian Gulf, South India, South Arabia, Persia, Southeast Asia, East Africa and China to each other.

Matrilineal seafarers and traders from Western Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula traversed the Indian Ocean, triggering major migrations of food culture, animals, musical instruments and maritime technology.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Muslim sailors and merchants probably stayed through monsoon periods or used the islands as respites.

What is the Royal Family connection?

The Arakkal family of Cannanore controlled the Lakshadweep islands from 1545 to 1819, which included the islands of Androth, Kavaratti, Agathi, Minicoy and Kalpeni. In 1789, the “Queen of Malabar" Junumabe II lost her fort to the British.

In 1908, Imbichi Ali Raja, the then Arakkal ruler of Lakshadweep, agreed to surrender sovereignty over the islands in return for an annual malikhana (pension) of Rs 23,000—an amount that is still paid to the family, which a few years ago petitioned for a raise.

What about tourism in Lakshadweep?

Out of a total of 36, only 10 islands of Lakshadweep are inhabited by the local populace – Androtт, Amini, Agatti, Bitra, Chetlat, Kadmath,

Kalpeni, Kiltan, Minicoy and Kavaratti; the latter being the headquarters of the Union Territory. The 11th island, Bangaram, holds a resort.

Kadmat is the centremost island in the Lakshadweep archipelago, the only island open to non-Indian visitors. Indians too can visit only one-third of the islands in order to protect the ecological balance and give the indigenous tribes their much need space.

According to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes list (modification orders), 1956, the inhabitants of Lakshadweep who and both of whose parents were born in these islands are treated as Scheduled Tribes. There are no Scheduled Castes in this Union Territory.

What is the current row about?

Parties have alleged that Praful Khoda Patel, the Administrator of the group of islands unilaterally lifted restrictions on the use of alcohol in the Muslim-majority islands, banned beef products, citing Animal Preservation and demolished fishermen's sheds built on the coastal areas, saying they violated the Coast Guard Act. The BJP, defending Patel, claimed that the protests were a result of his efforts to end "corrupt practices" involving local politicians prevalent and usher in development there.

Patel, who is the Administrator of the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, was given charge of Lakshadweep following the demise of Dineshwar Sharma in December last year.

The central government is committed to the development of Lakshadweep, which could emerge as a bustling tourism hub, said Patel, rejecting criticism that steps taken by him are detrimental to the traditional life, culture and peace there. He alleges that most of those who ruled the UT played the minority card and neglected development. Patel, a former legislator from Gujarat who has worked

with Narendra Modi as his minister of state for home in the western state's cabinet, stressed that he has no "communal agenda". On banning beef, he said most Indian states do not allow the sale of cow meat. "If this is implemented in Lakshadweep too, what's the harm?" Patel asked.

Patel also said the Anti-Social Activities Regulation Bill 2021, or the Goonda Act, is necessary to check criminal activities, especially large-scale smuggling of cannabis and illegal liquor trade. "Those who say there is no crime in Lakshadweep are not telling the truth," he said. In the same breath, he added allowing sale of liquor will stop the illegal trade, and help in revenue generation and tourism. Patel said those opposing the moves are "the same people who have not been able to carry out any development in the UT in last 70 years". "They do not want development here, as they think their interest will not be served," he said.

8. Chhattisgarh CM to meet tribals protesting security camp

A group of social activists, which was earlier stopped on its way to Silger, met Baghel and Governor Anusuiya Uikey on Tuesday with a list of the residents' demands. They said the protesters have sought an audience with both Baghel and Uikey.

A delegation of tribal residents protesting the establishment of a new security camp at Chhattisgarh's Silger will soon meet Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, a government statement said Tuesday.

A group of social activists, which was earlier stopped on its way to Silger, met Baghel and Governor Anusuiya Uikey on Tuesday with a list of the residents' demands. They said the protesters have sought an audience with both Baghel and Uikey.

The protesters have had two meetings with government representatives, both of which ended in a stalemate.

Tribal residents of more than 30 villages in Sukma, Bijapur and Dantewada districts have been protesting against the security camp at Silger since May 14.

On May 17, three men died after security personnel fired on the protesters after a clash broke out. The police claimed that three were Maoists who opened fire on the security personnel under cover of the crowd. Their families have dismissed the claims.

According to the protestors, police opened fire on the crowd which led to four deaths; three men died on the spot, while one woman succumbed to her injuries suffered in the ensuing stampede.

The delegation that met Baghel and Uikey on Tuesday included activist Bela Bhatia Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan convener Alok Shukla, Chhattisgarh Kisan Sabha President Sanjay Parate and trade union organization ACTU General Secretary Bijendra Tiwari.

The letter submitted to Baghel comprised 8 suggestions, including ensuring following of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and other rules, as applicable, for tribal residents of the state. The letter also demanded that cases of brutality against tribals from the time of previous BJP government be investigated.

A similar letter was submitted to the Governor.

Bhatia said, “She (Governor Uikey) said that she is aware about the situation and is going to look into it as it is a fifth schedule area. The conversation with both the dignitaries was positive, and we expect the government to soon meet the delegation of protestors.”

Shukla told the The Indian Express: “We told him how we were stopped and how the state machinery was misbehaving. We have informed the CM about our going to the protestors again, once the block is restored to non-containment zone status.”

The protestors had started with the demand that the camp should be removed and the land on which it is built be given back to its owners. After the death of the three men, the demands have increased to action against the security personnel responsible for the deaths and

other brutalities along with promise that the memorial built for the deceased not be damaged, when they stop their protest.

"We can't live here forever, we will go back to our homes and return in a few weeks. But we will keep protesting the camp. However, we dont want our memorial demolished, ever," Sures Kadti, one of the protestors said.

9. 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 tribalaffairs 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."

10.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) 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.

11. Hyderabad-based NGO supplies free oxygen in tribal thandas

HYDERABAD: Tribal thandas, which are largely inaccessible, have been badly hit due to Covid-19 and consequent restrictions on the movement of people. With no major hospitals around, tribals suffer a lot due to the pandemic virus.

Hyderabad-based NGO Social Data Initiatives Forum (SDIF) has taken up the task of supplying oxygen cylinders and other emergency health care material and medicines to people living in the far flung tribal habitations of Telangana. SDIF has come out with a technology to identify Covid-19 patients in need of oxygen in tribal habitations and supply them with oxygen cylinders free of cost. The SDIF's program integrates with Twitter API (application programming interface) and identifies tweets that have requests for oxygen. "The back-end team immediately calls those in need and arranges for oxygen," said SDIF founders Azam Khan and Khalid Saifullah.

The initiative has helped thousands of Covid-19 patients, especially in rural and tribal areas. “We tried to connect remote villages with technology and provided oxygen cylinders at their doorstep. We are assisting needy people all over India. We’ve already had setup oxygen banks in Hyderabad, Vikarabad, Kadapa, Guntur and Narayanpet. In other locations, we have identified NGOs providing oxygen. This network of NGOs is helping all, including people living in far-away tribal habitations,” Khan told TOI.
There is no deposit for the oxygen cylinder and for white card holders, transportation and refill are free.

12. Tribal children get their chance at online education

Mankode Eco-development Committee and forest dept collectively arranged TV sets, computers for underprivileged children

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Most tribal hamlets in Kottur are yet to realise how things have changed for the outside world due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Some are completely oblivious to the pandemic

itself. Forest department officials have started efforts to create awareness by distributing masks and setting up hand-wash kiosks in the settlements. When the education department decided to commence online classes for students across the state from June 1, the children of these tribal families found themselves at a disadvantage since they have no access to any electronic devices or smartphones. Tribal children from Kottur section, including areas like Mankode, Valippara, Mulamoodu, Ariyavila, Chonampara and Kaithode are among those facing the struggle.

However, forest officials and members of Mankode Eco-development Committee that works for the welfare of tribal settlements have now arranged computers and television sets to enable the tribal children to study. Nearly 75 students have started attending online classes through the facility made available in the Employment Guidance Centre of the forest office at Kottur.

“Children from the tribal hamlets have no access to the internet. Since the online classes began from June 1, many children had to miss out on the classes due to the lack of facilities. So, we thought of arranging provisions at our employment guidance centre so that children can attend classes in different batches,” said Gopika Surendran, beat forest officer -cum-secretary of Mankode Eco-development Committee. “Since children come from remote settlements, we have arranged transport facilities for them. Also, lunch is provided to them at the centre,” she added.

The classes began at the Employment Guidance Centre on Monday. The programme was inaugurated by J Devaprasad, Conservator of Forests, by handing over a TV set to J R Ani, Thiruvananthapuram Wildlife Warden. The forest officials have decided to set up television sets in common points inside the settlements so that children need not travel everyday to the centre.

Officials are also planning to give special classes to children who are appearing for Class X exams this year. "We have been giving PSC coaching to tribal children. This time, we are planning to teach 12 students who are appearing for the board exams," said Gopika.

Mini library attheCentre

Catering to children of the six settlements in Kottoor section, a mini library has also been set up in the centre where reference as well as fictional books will be made available in the coming days. Nearly 100 books have already been made available in the library with the help of forest officials, NGOs and clubs for tribal children inside the settlements. Since new books cannot be made available to all the children due to the lack of funds, members of the Mankode Eco-development Committee have decided to collect books from people who are willing to contribute. Nadabrahmam, a youth club in the tribal sector, was the first to donate books and study materials.

13. Bengal's Tribal Women Lead Change, Ensure Food-Security and Fight Social Ills

Tribal women of Purulia district in West Bengal have learnt, with the help of several NGOs and SHGs, to implement efficient water

management techniques and multi-crop approach and achieved food-sufficiency in a region that was on the 'drought-hit' list in spite of heavy rainfalls. They are now tackling social ills in their villages!

It was ironical that Purulia district often found itself on the West Bengal government's 'drought-hit' list when the average rainfall here is 1100mm-1500mm. The failure to conserve water as well as poor agricultural practices meant that despite back-breaking labour in the fields, farmers could only achieve six months' food sufficiency.

Today, however, all that is changing thanks to a water management revolution led by ordinary village women, a majority of them tribals. "The magic has been worked through our Self Help Group's (SHGs) water management programme," says Sadmoni Hembram, 39, of Tilaboni village, who proudly informs that she has a multi-crop land that yields two vegetable and one paddy crop in a year these days.

In an area where development has been stunted due to a weak government machinery and increasing Maoist influence, SHGs like Sadmoni's 'Petre Madwa' have spearheaded developmental initiatives like the Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) under the government's Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojna (SGSY). Of course, this has been achieved with guidance from Pradan, an NGO working on creating sustainable livelihood in the region.

Explains Kuntalika Kumbhakar, Integrator (state unit), Pradan:

Purulia that falls in the Agro-Economical Zone 7 gets adequate rainfall, yet most of the water just flows away, particularly in the hilly areas. Therefore, we train the SHG women to conserve water, increase water harvesting and water table levels, check soil erosion and offer a combination of crops best suited to the category of land and available water resources to improve livelihood

As per Sadmoni, in order to improve access to water for irrigation in her village, they have "made 'hapas', or small water tanks, where rain

water is collected." These 'hapas' have a technical design, wherein the lowest point of the field is excavated in steps and the rain water flows into the tank. "The size of these tanks varies from 30ftx30ft to 100ftx100ft depending on the area that needs to be irrigated," she says. Once the water is collected, the next step is to ensure that a minimum amount is used to irrigate the maximum area.

Better water management has led to a remodelling of local agricultural practices with farmers now cultivating short-term crops. The land in Purulia falls into four categories and the tribal population categorises them as: 'byde' or upland, 'kanali', which refers to surface-level medium upland as well as medium lowland, and 'bohal' or low-lying land. Says Sadmoni:

The land holdings among the families of women in the 184 SHGs in Burrabazar block fall under the medium upland category. Today, we first plant a pre-monsoon cash crop like vegetables or creepers such as cucumber or gourds, which use the north-western showers. Later, a short-term paddy crop that is sufficient for our use is sown. This is followed by another vegetable cash crop. There is sufficient water because along with the monsoons, we use the 'hapas' water. In extreme dry seasons, we plant mustard for a short term. Almost all farmers now have at least double or three crops.

To celebrate this agricultural turnaround and to compare notes and share strategies on varied concerns in the region, recently around 5,000 women belonging to 350 SHGs, organised under two federations, 'Jhalda Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh' and 'Sabuj Sathi Nari Shakti Sangh', came together for a 'mahaadhiveshan', or mass meeting, held in the Barrabazar and Jhalda blocks of Purulia, respectively. All these women are true change-makers and have shown that by simply ensuring better outcomes from traditional livelihoods like agriculture, achieved through practices like watershed land and water management measures, micro-credit financing, and horticulture, poor village households, too, can lead a life of dignity.

Like Sadmoni, Sarathi Kumar Bala, 30, who was present at the 'mahaadhiveshan', is a happy woman today. In addition to water conservation, she, and other tribal women of the Narayani Mahila Samity in Berada village, has understood the importance of safe drinking water and hygiene. Here, the Water for All intervention, which focuses on safe drinking water and sanitation and on bringing about a change in the attitude of the villager, has made the difference. Effecting change, Sarathi's group has been conducting house visits to convince villagers to keep their surroundings clean, wash hands regularly and not to defecate in the open. "We also make them aware of the Rs 3,200 government subsidy to build latrines if they contribute Rs 300 themselves," she says.

As Sarathi's village group successfully put into practice the Water For All strategy, their tribal sisters in Mohuldi hamlet, which falls under Jhalda I Block, were not far behind. In an area characterised by water scarcity, the Radha Rani SHG, led by Balika Mahato, has pioneered an initiative to provide piped drinking water. "We not only constructed several water harvesting structures for irrigation, but have set up a pipe distribution channel across the village to ensure that water from deep tube wells used for drinking is not wasted," says Balika, 38.

Even in the hilly terrain of Bagmundi and Ayodhya blocks, tribal women from 65 SHGs now know how to hold on to the rain water that previously used to simply flow away. They have devised low-cost methods like building earthen dams and using the gravitational flow mechanism to carry the water to the site through channels. "The cost is minimal and the women are reaping the benefits in the form of increased agricultural yield," points out Kuntalika.

In Gokurnagar village, for instance, 8-10 bighas of non-fertile land today is yielding paddy, potato and mustard crops through the year because of the efforts of the Bidhuchandan Mahila Samity, a group of 14 tribal women. "We first built mud banks around the land to prevent soil erosion and allowed the rain water to stagnate for a year.

Then we spread cow dung fertiliser to make the soil fertile and dug several 'hapas'. After the fertiliser dried up, we did a soil test and then planted our first paddy crop. For the last two years, we are also harvesting potato and mustard on the same land," beams Mangali Mandi, 28, the treasurer of the group.

With a flourishing livelihood prototype in place, the Purulia women are now training their energies on tackling the social problems plaguing them. Partnering this process is Delhi-based women's resource group, Jagori, under a special gender empowerment project initiated in 2011 and supported by the UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality. Says Mangali:

During the 'mahaadhiveshan' we discussed issues like child marriage and dowry. In Purulia, there are over 40 per cent child marriages and dowry, though non-existent amongst tribals, is a problem for the OBCs. We have also found that female selective abortions are on the rise. Today, we have the strength and solidarity to oppose these social evils and that is our next course of action.

Incidentally, things are already starting to look up. Take Gokurnagar village. Where earlier the women were not allowed to venture out of homes, often prevented from attending SHG meetings and forced to migrate with the family during the harvest season, they now enjoy an equal status in decision making. Of course, it helps that their economic status has improved considerably.

In fact, this is the story across Burrabazar block where the 184 SHGs have a total fund value of one crore ninety lakh rupees, of which they disbursed one crore thirty-five lakh rupees in loans in the last financial year. Such has been the impact of this socio-economic empowerment that Sadmoni says, "Aajkal dada bagale gecche, amra meeting esche (These days men take the cattle for grazing while we attend a meeting)!"

Purulia's SHG movement is a development initiative without a political umbrella and it has given recognition and dignity to women, who earlier had no significance, presence or voice.

14. Jharkhand: Tribal Farmers Tap Solar Irrigation To Cut Migration

A view of solar panels that power an irrigation system in the village of Pandu in the Indian state of Jharkhand. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Soumya Sarkar

The Chotanagpur Plateau in eastern India, crisscrossed with streams, once was lush green even in winter.

But increasingly erratic rainfall in recent years has made life much harder for the region's impoverished indigenous subsistence farmers, most of whom rely on monsoon rains between June and September to grow a thirsty rice crop.

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"Our land is rich, but our people are poor," said Gagu Oraon, a farmer from the Oraon indigenous community in Tukutoli, a village that has struggled with low yields and crop failure.

But now clean-energy technology is providing help, in the form of a new solar-powered irrigation system that helps about 30 local farmers get dependable water, allowing them to diversify their crops without producing planet-warming emissions.

Along with rice, the farmers now are growing vegetables and selling the surplus – something that is providing more income and stability at home, Oraon noted.

"For young people in the village, it's a relief not migrating for work," he said.

A rising number of Indian farmers are turning to solar-powered irrigation, which agricultural experts say can help communities feed their families and generate income while battling climate threats – all without producing more planet-warming emissions.

As part of a project by the Transform Rural India foundation (TRI), a non-profit based in New Delhi, farmers in Tukutoli installed a solar system that pumps water from a small rivulet and provides reliable irrigation to about 30 acres (12 hectares).

The farmers can control the amount of water that goes to their rice crops and also grow vegetables such as cauliflower, eggplant, okra and cabbage.

"Tribal communities, who typically do not have access to irrigation, are among the most vulnerable to climate risks," said Anas Rahman, a researcher with the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), a New Delhi-based think tank.

"Providing access to irrigation is important as a climate adaptation measure."

Solar pumps can be the main pillar for a new vision of more climate-friendly agricultural development, he added.

A view of Gagu Oraon, left, and other farmers who are using solar energy to irrigate their farms in Tukutoli, a village in the Indian state of Jharkhand, October 2019. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Soumya Sarkar

CLEAN ENERGY, READILY AVAILABLE

In the uplands of Chotanagpur Plateau and other parts of Jharkhand, temperatures have been rising and rainfall patterns have become more unpredictable in recent decades, a phenomenon that climate experts attribute to global warming.

A 2018 study by researchers from the Birla Institute of Technology Mesra and Central University of Jharkhand found a "declining trend of cumulative rainfall" in the region between 1984 and 2014.

Irrigation can help stabilise crop production in the face of climate change, farming experts say, and solar-powered systems have advantages over diesel systems and rainfed farming.

“Diesel contributes to carbon emissions,” said Satyabrata Acharyya, a development expert at Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), a non-profit working in Jharkhand.

“Also tribal farmers living in remote areas find it difficult to travel long distances to buy diesel from fuel stations,” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. “Solar energy is available on-site, the machinery is easy to maintain and it is clean energy,” he added.

RELIABLE INCOME

Until they got their irrigation system, many men from the village of Chandrapur, home to about 100 families from the Munda indigenous community, migrated to places like Kerala and Punjab states in search of work and wages.

Two years ago, rice farmers in the village on Chotanagpur Plateau banded together with TRI to install a solar-powered irrigation system.

“Many of us are now cultivating cauliflowers that fetch a good price in the market,” said Mangra Bhengra, a young farmer who runs and maintains the village’s solar pump.

“Who needs to migrate if you can make money in the village?” he asked

A view of solar panels that power an irrigation system in the village of Pandu in the Indian state of Jharkhand. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Soumya Sarkar

Vegetables require less water than rice, and drip irrigation – which puts small amounts of water only where needed – can cut water consumption by 30%-70% while increasing crop yield by up to 60% compared to irrigating fields by flooding them, said Bikash Das, senior scientist at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR).

Access to irrigation also can provide farmers with a more reliable income, since one farm can produce several yields of vegetables each year, he added.

"Many vegetables are ready in three months, which means farmers can gather three or four harvests in a year," Das said, noting that they can make between 50,000 and 100,000 rupees ($670-$1,340) per year from one acre of vegetables.

Solar-based irrigation projects in India have increased from about 18,000 in 2014-15 to nearly 200,000 in recent years, according to the 2020 United Nations Water and Climate Change report.

In the past few years, PRADAN, TRI and other non-profits have helped install more than 700 solar-powered irrigation systems in

impoverished villages in Jharkhand, representatives of the groups told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The success of such interventions prompted India's federal government last year to launch an effort to install about 2 million solar pumps around India by 2022, said the U.N. report.

"There is a strong need for irrigation methods that can provide adequate hydration for crops even with a limited supply of water, without requiring significant energy input or financial capital," said Das at ICAR.

COST HURDLES

Some farmers and climate experts point to the expense of buying and installing such systems as an obstacle to wider uptake of solar irrigation.

The upfront cost of installing a solar-powered system is higher than for diesel-run irrigation, noted Ashok Kumar, a director at TRI.

"But solar is more cost-efficient in the long run, because recurring costs are virtually nil. The rising cost of diesel to run pumps can be prohibitive for smallholder farmers," he said. Under a $100-million World Bank project, about 2,000 solar irrigation systems will be installed in Jharkhand by 2023.

The Indian government is covering most of the cost of buying solar-powered pumps for the irrigation systems it plans to install across the country, with farmers or non-profits paying the rest.

"In some cases, villagers are even willing to pool their own money to install these systems," said Kumar.

As solar irrigation systems become more popular, Rahman at the CEEW said many indigenous farmers already have eco-friendly lifestyles.

"We have a lot to learn from them," he said. "The practices of tribal communities – along with cleaner means of energy and irrigation access – can be the lighthouses that will show the world sustainable ways of agriculture."

Featured image: Farmer Gagu Oraon stands in front of solar panels that power an irrigation system in Tukutoli, a village in the Indian state of Jharkhand, October 2019.

15. Sarna Dharam Code: Of Adivasi identity and eco-nationalism

Experts on Adivasi culture about the recent resolution passed by the Jharkhand Assembly, asking for a separate religion code for tribals

The Jharkhand State Assembly, in a special session sent a resolution to the Union government asking for a separate religion code for the tribal population in the upcoming Census 2021 exercise. The resolution named it 'Sarna Adivasi Dharam'.

Followers of 'Sarna' are usually nature worshippers. They have been demanding recognition of it as a distinct religion for decades. At present, under the census, there are codes for only six religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism. While filling in these columns, a tribal resident has to identify himself or herself as one of these or as 'others', but cannot specify his / her religion as a different one.

In census surveys during 1871-1951, there was a separate category for the tribal population. But later, this was dropped. In independent India, the tribal identity has been about constitutional provisions promising to protect their rights and central laws promising to protect their land. Although recognised as an administrative and social category — Scheduled Tribes — these communities have never been recognised as a separate religious group.

For the Census 2011, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes did recommend the addition of this code. Demand for the separate religion code picked up in Jharkhand as preparations for the survey started in September.

Till now, the Union government has not agreed to this. But while debating the resolution, state Chief Minister Hemant Soren said the Sarna Dharam can teach a lot to the world facing problems, such as pollution and environmental degradation, as it is all about worshipping nature, forests, and mountains.

The resolution has resurrected the debate over whether tribal religion is a distinct ecological way of life or just a belief system. It is often argued that tribal religious belief is an ecological expression of their existence that maintains an intimate relationship with nature.

This is the reason, in April 2013, the Supreme Court ordered gram sabhas (village councils) to hold referendums on whether a mining project of the Vedanta Group in the Niyamgiri hill region of Odisha's Rayagada and Kalahandi districts violated the religious and cultural rights of the local tribal populations. Ultimately, 12 villages rejected the mining project, citing violation of their religious and cultural rights that have an umbilical link to natural resources.

"It's our identity"

DEEPAK BIRUA

MEMBER OF THE JHARKHAND LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, FROM THE JHARKHAND MUKTI MORCHA PARTY

In 2016, the Union government decided that the Scheduled Tribes

can be recorded under any of the six religions recognised by the census. But why? We have a religion of our own.

The resolution is for the recognition of this tribal identity. In India, communities with populations smaller than those of the tribal groups enjoy separate religious identity. The Constitution has a separate schedule (fifth) for the tribal population. Then why is our religion not recognised?

While the population of all other groups are increasing, the tribal population is decreasing. But in the absence of any recognition of our religion, our population estimation suffers.

Since all constitutional safeguards and welfare provisions are based on population estimation, we also fail to benefit from those measures. Gradually, many areas under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution would be denotified, citing a declining tribal population. There is a need for recognising this separate identity and that's what we are doing.

USHA RAMANATHAN,

JURIST AND MEMBER OF XAXA COMMITTEE ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

They are asking for adding a column in the census and assigning the tribal religion a code. Since the census is based on self-identification, there is no reason not to permit this.

Getting a code assigned in the census would not add the religion to the list of religions recognised in the law, although it could begin to provide legitimacy to such a claim over time.

This seems a way to assert tribal identity and maintain its distinctiveness. The erosion of recognition of the tribal way of life

seems to be one reason people are asking for this status in the Constitution.

Since the census is about the state learning about people to figure out how it needs to plan, there does not seem anything startling about asking for recognition of the tribal identity.

Since there is a lot of tribal migration, it seems this is the distinctive marker that the legislature has identified to establish a person as belonging to tribal communities. It may be seen as a move against 'mainstreaming', which seems to threaten the tribal identity. Their dropping numbers speak of that possibility of erasure.

"It has an ecological basis"

RAMESH SHARAN

VICE CHANCELLOR, VINOBA BHAVE UNIVERSITY, HAZARIBAG, JHARKHAND

The Scheduled Tribes communities can be divided into three categories — those who have adopted Christianity; those who have converted to Hinduism and those who do not identify as either of these, but are recorded as Hindus in the census.

The last category is similar to Hindus, but is not the same. For example, they do not have a caste hierarchy. There are certain overlaps with the Hindus, for instance, worshipping of some trees like sacred fig (peepal) and banyan (bargad).

But Sarna or Adi Dharam is a more naturalistic way of life that just happens to involve nature worship, sacred places and priests.

This demand for a separate Sarna code can be seen as an assertion of that identity. With an ecological basis, this assertion is also part of a larger identity taking shape worldwide.

"We are part of the ecosystem, not masters of it"

SONAJHARIA MINZ

VICE CHANCELLOR, SIDO KANHU MURMU UNIVERSITY, DUMKA, JHARKHAND

I don't see this as an assertion of an ecological identity. It is an old demand to assert tribal identity. For the tribal population that continues to follow their own culture and religion, it is a question of their identity first and, maybe, then a question of an ecological identity.

According to the tribal ethos, community is part of an ecosystem and not the master of it. The tribal religion is different from Hinduism as it does not have a figure of god.

There is a supreme spirit that does not have a name and is worshipped. There is reverence for nature in the form of trees, mountains and rivers, as they are seen as the manifestation of that supreme spirit. The denial of this identity distorts the census figures.

On the one hand, we recognise them as Scheduled Tribes in the census, on the other, we deny them the right to their own religious or cultural identity.

Vinita Damodaran,

Professor of South Asian History (History), Professor of South Asian History (International Development) School of Media, Arts and Humanities, University of Sussex

As a historian of the Adivasis of Jharkhand it is important to understand and respect their cultural and spiritual traditions associated in the past with the Sarna or sacred grove. The current resolution about a new religious category, sarna adivasi dharam which draws on these ecological traditions and is a celebration of difference. India needs to embrace its multiple religious and cultural traditions and this new religious category is about recognising and respecting this difference.

In the context of the long historical exploitation of adivasi communities all over India and the marginalisation of their cultural and religious norms this resolution is of enormous significance in restoring their identity which has been linked to the land and the forests of Jharkhand. In one sense, it is also a celebration of their ecological identity.

Ambika Aiyadurai, Anthropologist, Assistant Professor, IIT Gandhinagar

The passage of the Sarna code by the Jharkhand Assembly is interesting and important at many levels. Indigenous activists in Jharkhand and elsewhere have been resisting to be part of other mainstream religions.

Both Christianity and Hindutva groups (in northeast India) are competing with each other to bring the tribal communities under their respective folds. To resist this, there has been serious attempts to institutionalise the indigenous faith of

the respective tribal communities, to create space for their own faith. Indigenous people are often caught up in a struggle to maintain their unique indigenous identity.

The role of ecology / nature in building nationalism or regional pride through 'nature-based' symbols cannot be sidelined. The passing of the Sarna code is a form of 'eco-nationalism'.

This is a specific blend of environmentalism and sentiments attached to local ecology through the feelings of people's belonging to the land, their connection to their motherland, their origins and their histories.

In Jharkhand, using the Sarna code, a need to have a separate identity different from Christianity or an identity at par with this religion is being put forward. Resistance to the mainstream religious groups, not only undermine the indigenous faith as 'barbaric', and 'backward' but their meat-eating habits, 'slaughtering of domestic animals' are seen as inferior to the Hindu Brahmanical rituals. Such efforts (passing Sarna code), perhaps is to counter the spread of Hindu nationalism in the state.

Relationship of adivasis with the forests and nature is complex and pragmatic. Perhaps, nature-worshipping is one of the aspects, which is often glorified. Infact, forests are feared for wild animals (elephants, tigers and other carnivores) and for the forest spirits, which should be avoided whenever possible.

Forests also help in sustaining the local livelihoods and economy (firewood, medicinal plants, leaves, mushrooms, etc). The dependence on their immediate environment is crucial for their lives. They see forests as part of their social and cultural landscape, for both extraction and preservation. It is better to avoid having a simplistic reading of the indigenous relationship with forests.

16. CHANGPA TRIBE :

- The **Changpa** are a **semi-nomadic Tibetan people** found mainly in the Changtang in Ladakh and in Jammu and Kashmir.
- A smaller number resides in the western regions of the **Tibet Autonomous Region** and were partially relocated for the establishment of the **Changtang Nature Reserve.**
- As of 1989 there were half a million nomads living in the Changtang area.

OCCUPATION

The Changpa of are **high altitude pastoralists**, raising mainly yaks and goats.

WO DIVISIONS :

- Among the Ladakh Changpa, those who are still nomadic are known as **Phalpa**, and they take their herds from in the **Hanley Valley to the village of Lato.**
- Hanley is home to six isolated settlements, where the **sedentary Changpa**, the **Fangpa** reside.

MARRAIGE :

Despite their different lifestyles, both these **groups intermarry.**

LANGUAGE :

The Changpa speak **Changskhat**, a dialect of Tibetan, and practice Tibetan Buddhism.

PASHMINA WOOL

- The Changpas rear the highly pedigreed and prized Changra goats (Capra Hircus) that yield the **rare Pashmina fibre** (Cashmere wool).
- The Cashmere goats (Changra goats) are **not raised for their meat but for their fibre** (pashm).
- The pashmina fibre (Pashm in Persian) is the **finest fibre of all goat hair**.

This tribe's motto could be 'work hard, play hard'**, because the Changpa pursue a clear goal: to work as much as possible in the summer months, and to relax in winter, when it's not possible to work due to the extreme low temperatures.**

17. As Rajasthan's tribal districts lag behind, state offers rations, free travel as incentives for shots

In Rajasthan, where the state average is 78.3%, the vaccine coverage for the 45-plus age group is the lowest in the tribal districts of Udaipur (63.9%), Dungarpur (62.7%) and Pratapgarh (59.3%).

A tribal youth at a village in Udaipur waves a sickle at booth-level officer Dinesh Chandra Joshi, questioning him on deaths due to vaccination. “It’s just a rumour. People died not because of vaccines but Covid-19,” Joshi exhorts. But the youth is not taken in.

As the Covid vaccination drive enters the next phase with the government providing free shots to all adults starting Monday, Udaipur is focusing on persuading the “movable middle” in tribal hinterlands, including with measures like distributing ration kits, offering free travel to nearest Covid centres, and roping in bhupas (tribal priests).

In Rajasthan, where the state average is 78.3%, the vaccine coverage for the 45-plus age group is the lowest in the tribal districts of Udaipur (63.9%), Dungarpur (62.7%) and Pratapgarh (59.3%).

In Jhadol block of Udaipur with 34% vaccine coverage, Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) Gunjan Singh has distributed around 2,000 free ration kits.

"These kits include oil, poha (puffed rice), rice, dal and flour. We sourced these food items, which were about to expire, from 12-13 tribal hostels, which are shut due to Covid," she says. With the items sourced from hostels getting over now, some NGOs have come forward to help.

Durga Ram, a government teacher who wields influence in Madri panchayat for having rescued around 100 minors from child labour, says the task to convince villagers, who hold their tradition dear and are suspicious of modern medicine, is tough but not insurmountable.

"When we visit villages, people ask us to guarantee that they will not die post vaccination. Sometimes, we are not allowed to enter villages. But I tell them that if anything happens, I will provide mautana (compensation to a family in the event of death)," he says, vowing 100% vaccine coverage in two weeks.

Singh seconds Durga Ram. "If somebody asks for mautana, we agree to it. Our work is not limited to vaccination. We undertake follow-ups too to ensure that the vaccinated people, through word of mouth, \can spread the message of our good intentions."

Ration shops are another point of contact for officials. "Here, the village population is scattered and each phalla (the smallest unit in a village) has 10-15 households… At ration shops, our booth-level officers cross-check people vaccinated against electoral rolls. If they haven't got the shot, our officials persuade them," says District Magistrate Chetan Deora. The administration also provides government vehicles to take people to nearest centres and bring them back.

Deora denies reports that the tribal community is being arm-twisted with the threat of stopping their ration if they don't get vaccinated. A video on social media shows an official in Udaipur warning penal action against shopkeepers and vegetable vendors.

At Mavli block of the district, SDM Mayank Manish has adopted a top-down approach. “First, our focus is to vaccinate sarpanchs and panchs. Almost all sarpanchs have been covered. Though our word may not be taken seriously, sarpanchs can present our case more convincingly,” says Manish.

His block has also compiled data on villagers as per their occupation. “There are super-spreaders like shopkeepers and vegetable vendors. We have held special camps for them. For vulnerable groups like widows and differently abled, we are providing free travel to the vaccination centre,” he says.

Of the 1,520 differently abled above 45 years of age in Mavli, 1,003 have got at least one Covid dose.

In Kotra block, which has the lowest vaccine coverage at 6%, the administration though is struggling to push up the numbers. “We are doing our best. We have formed small teams to cover all villages. Bhupas have been contacted. On Saturdays and Sundays, we participate in their pujas to build trust,” says SDM Sadhuram Jat.

Dr Ashok Aditya, the district nodal official for vaccination, blames rumours against vaccines for the prevalent fears. One of the ways they are trying to counter it is through videos of vaccinated people. “These clips are circulated in various groups.”

State Family Welfare Director Laxman Singh Ola attributes the vaccine resistance among tribals to “socio-economic backwardness and low levels of literacy”. “But we are trying to bust myths and discredit rumours. Another hurdle is vaccine availability.”With 2.08 crore doses administered, Rajasthan is the fourth state to cross the 2-crore mark. It has received or procured 2.21 crore doses of Covishield and Covaxin. On June 19, the Centre informed Rajasthan that the state would be allocated 65.20 lakh vaccines for the month. In its reply on Monday, the state questioned the allocation, saying that even by June 31, around 74.66 lakh people have to be given the second dose.

18. Rengma Nagas Demand Autonomous District Council

The Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC) or **Rengma Nagas** have **demanded an Autonomous District Council (ADC)** in **Assam.**

- The Central and the State governments recently upgraded the **Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC)** and the **North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC)** to territorial councils like the **Bodoland Territorial Council.**
    - The **'status of territorial council'** will provide **more autonomy and financial grant** to them.
- It is alleged that the creation of these tribal councils deprived the Rengma Nagas, the "legitimate owners", of the land. Both the **KAAC** and the **NCHAC share boundaries with Nagaland.**

Key Points

- **About the Rengma Naga Tribe:**
    - **Found in:**

        - Rengma is **a Naga tribe** found in **Nagaland, Assam** and **Arunachal Pradesh.**
    - **History:**
        - The **first official recording of the Rengma Nagas staying in Assam's Karbi Hills (then known as Mikir Hills)** was made in 1855 by Major John Butler, a British officer posted in the Northeastern region.
        - Butler recorded that the **Rengmas in Karbi Anglong had migrated there from the Naga Hills in the early part of the 18th century**, abandoned many of their tribal customs and married within the local communities.
    - **Festival:** The harvest festival of the Rengmas is called **Ngada.**
- **Autonomous District Council (ADC):**
    - **About:**
        - The **Sixth Schedule** of the Constitution deals with the administration of the **tribal areas** in the four northeastern states of **Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.**
            - The special provision is **provided under Article 244 (2) and Article 275** of the Constitution.
        - The tribals have been given freedom to exercise legislative and executive powers through an **autonomous regional council and ADCs.**
    - **Composition of Autonomous Councils:**
        - Each autonomous district and regional council **consists of not more than 30 members**, of which four are nominated by the governor and the rest via elections. All of them **remain in power for a term of five years.**
        - However, the **Bodoland Territorial Council is an exception** as it can **constitute up to 46 members.**
    - **Governor's Control:**

        - Despite various degrees of autonomy, the 6th Schedule area **does not fall outside the executive authority of the state concerned.**
        - The **governor is empowered to organise and re-organise** the autonomous districts.
    - **Applicability of Central and State Laws:**
        - The **Acts passed by Parliament** and **state legislatures** may or may not be levied in these regions unless the **President and the governor gives her or his approval**, with or without modifications in the laws for the autonomous regions.
    - **Civil and Criminal Judicial Powers:** The Councils have also been endowed with wide civil and criminal judicial powers, for example **establishing village courts** etc.
        - However, the jurisdiction of these councils is subject to the jurisdiction of the concerned High Court.
    - **Existing Autonomous Councils:** The sixth schedule to the Constitution includes **10 autonomous district councils in 4 states.** These are:
        - **Assam:** Bodoland Territorial Council, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and North Cachar Hills/Dima Hasao Autonomous Council.
        - **Meghalaya:** Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council.
        - **Tripura:** Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council.
        - **Mizoram:** Chakma Autonomous District Council, Lai Autonomous District Council, Mara Autonomous District Council.
- **Arguments of Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC):**
    - **Rengmas** were the **first tribal people in Assam to have encountered the British in 1839.**

        - But the existing **Rengma Hills was eliminated from the political map of the State and replaced with that of Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) in 1951.**
    - The Rengmas gave shelter to the **Ahom** refugees during the Burmese invasions of Assam in 1816 and 1819.
        - The **Ahom are an ethnic group from the Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.**
    - The **Rengma Hills and Mikir Hills** were **two separate entities until 1951.** The **Rengma Hills was partitioned in 1963 between Assam and Nagaland.**
        - Karbis have no history in the Rengma Hills.
        - At the time of creation of Nagaland State, the **Karbis were known as Mikirs till 1976.**
            - They were the **indigeneous tribal people of Mikir Hills.**
    - The **Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC)** population is around 12 lakh and the Karbis constitute only 3 lakh, the remaining are non-Karbis, including the Rengma Nagas, whose population is around 22,000.
- **NSCN (I-M) Stand:**
    - The **National Socialist Council of Nagaland or NSCN (Isak-Muivah)** has said that the Rengma issue was one of the important agendas of the "**Indo-Naga political talks**" and no authority should go far enough to override their interests.
    - NSCN (IM) had signed a Naga Peace Accord with the Government of India in August 2015, but the final accord is yet to be finalised.
        - One of the most contentious demands of the NSCN (IM) was the **creation of a unified Naga homeland, called 'Greater Nagalim'** by integrating the Naga-inhabited areas of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal with Nagaland.

19. In India, forest rights means forest conservation

Shruti Agarwal writes: There is a need and the ecosystem to support forest rights in India.

On June 14, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the UN High-Level Dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought. He reiterated that India was on track to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030, citing the example of the Banni grassland in Gujarat where the region's highly degraded lands were being restored and the livelihoods of pastoralists supported using what he termed a "novel approach."

One of Asia's largest tropical grasslands, Banni is home to great biological diversity and is the lifeline of its pastoralist communities. However, climate change and the invasion by Prosopis juliflora — a species that covers nearly 54 per cent of the grassland — have severely impacted its unique ecology. A study conducted earlier this year recognises that unless action is taken, Banni grassland is headed for severe fodder scarcity.

This is precisely what the Banni's pastoralist communities (Maldharis) have been doing for the past few years. They uproot Prosopis in the

pre-monsoon period and when it rains, the native grass species' regenerate from their rootstock. Their endeavour needs to be supported.

Local communities applying their deep knowledge of the local ecology to become "decision-makers" in restoring their commons is indeed novel in India. However, the mandate for them to do so is not new. Through the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, adivasis and other traditional forest-dwelling communities, including pastoralists, are legally empowered to decide on the management and restoration of their community forest resources (CFR) and stop any activity that adversely impacts biodiversity or the local ecology.

Today — similar to the Banni grasslands — our forests are grappling with degradation, an important contributor to GHG emissions. More than 40 per cent of the forest cover is open, often degraded. India has committed to restore 26 million hectares of degraded forests and lands by 2030 under the Bonn pledge. As part of its Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement, it has also targeted creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes by 2030 through additional forest and tree cover.

Forest restoration is an important climate mitigation strategy. Beyond carbon sequestration, its benefits include biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. India's potential to remove carbon through forest restoration is among the highest in the Global South as per a 2020 study published in Nature, Ecology and Evolution. At 123.3 million, India also has the greatest number of people living near areas with forest restoration opportunities (within 8km).

Initiatives to restore degraded landscapes are, however, not new to India. Be it social forestry in the 1970s, tree growers' cooperative societies in the 1980s, Joint Forest Management in the 1990s or the National Afforestation Programme and Green India Mission in the last two decades, studies have found them to have limited restoration

benefits. These initiatives have drawn criticism for paying little attention to the land and forest tenure of local communities, failing to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge, and not assisting communities to receive the opportunities they desire from restoration.

By assigning rights to protect, manage and restore around 40 million hectare of forests to village-level democratic institutions, CFR rights under FRA tackle these issues. There are several cases of CFR rights enabling successful ecological restoration of forests, biodiversity conservation and food and livelihood security. The recognition of these rights, however, has happened at an extremely slow pace. Less than 5 per cent of the total potential area has been brought under CFR. In Banni too, title deeds formally recognising the CFR rights of the pastoralists are yet to be issued. Institutional support for CFR remains minimal.

There are compelling reasons for India to recognise and support CFR rights. Strong, peer-reviewed evidence from across the world shows that community forests with legally recognised rights are healthier and associated with lower deforestation rates, higher carbon storage and biodiversity compared to other forests. In its 2019 Special Report on Climate Change and Land, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change also noted that "land titling and recognition programmes, particularly those that authorise and respect indigenous and communal tenure, can lead to improved management of forests, including for carbon storage."

Global attention is on ecosystem restoration — the United Nations theme for the decade. India's restoration commitments are amongst the most ambitious in the world. Its potential to benefit from forest restoration is also among the highest. It also has a legal framework — the Forest Rights Act — that facilitates an approach internationally acknowledged as essential for combating climate change. All that is needed now is to recognise and support community forest rights.

20. 'Greater Tipraland' sparks fears, leaders say it's for NE tribals' progress

TIPRA Motha claims it is necessary for the socio economic development of indigenous tribals inhabiting in the eight northeastern states and the neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh

Amid all major political parties' opposition and skeptical stand, tribal party 'TIPRA Motha', which in the April 6 elections had captured the politically important Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) defeating the ruling BJP-IPFT alliance, CPI-M and Congress, has passed a resolution in the council on Friday to create a "Greater Tipraland". TIPRA Motha claims it is necessary for the socio economic development of indigenous tribals inhabiting in the eight northeastern states and the neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh.

The Greater Tipraland demand of the TIPRA (The Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance) Motha ('Motha' is a tribal word

meaning tribals' unity) created huge controversy, doubts and fears in the mixed populated Tripura ever since the newly-formed party headed by Tripura's royal scion Pradyot Bikram Manikya Deb Barman raised the demand in 2019.

The TTAADC, which has a jurisdiction over two-thirds of Tripura's 10,491 sq km area and is home to over 12,16,000 people, of which 90 per cent are tribals, was constituted under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution in June 1985 for the socio-economic development of the tribals, who have always played a significant role in Tripura politics as they constitute one-third of the northeastern state's four million population.

TTAADC member Runeil Debbarma, who moved the resolution in the council session on Thursday which was adopted the next day, said that the resolution would now be sent to the Governor, the state government and the Centre to create a Greater Tipraland. "Under the Greater Tipraland concept, a powerful council would be constituted for the all-round socio economic development of the indigenous tribals residing in the eight northeastern states and the neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh. Such councils exist in European countries. We want to resolve the tribals' basic problems permanently," Debbarma told IANS.

Royal scion Deb Barman, who was the state President of the Congress in Tripura and is known to be a close friend of Rahul Gandhi, had quit the party in 2019 over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) issue, said that the Greater Tipraland concept is only for the protection of the tribals and their socio economic development.

"The demand is not against any non-tribal community, neither political or for vote bank politics. This is purely for the upliftment of a backward community," Deb Barman told IANS, adding that his party wants development of the tribals residing in the entire northeast region and the neighbouring countries. He, however, said that until

the Central government accepts the Greater Tipraland demand, their agitation and campaign programme would continue.

The ruling and opposition parties, including the BJP, CPI-M and Congress, before the April 6 elections to the TTAADC had strongly opposed the Greater Tipraland demand of TIPRA Motha and the Tipraland (separate state for the tribals) demand of the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), the junior ally of the BJP.

The IPFT has been agitating since 2009 for the creation of a separate state by upgrading the TTAADC. The leaders of the three national parties are now saying that the TIPRA Motha leadership must explain the concept of Greater Tipraland. BJP chief spokesman Subrata Chakraborty said that TIPRA Motha supremo Deb Barman must be clear on the formation of Greater Tipraland and only then the BJP's stand would be announced.

Prominent tribal leader and BJP's Lok Sabha MP Rebati Tripura said that the Greater Tipraland demand of TIPRA Motha still remained ambiguous and unless they divulge their transparent aim about the creation of Greater Tipraland, they won't be able to judge their intention.

"Before the April 6 elections to the TTAADC, the TIPRA Motha leaders, especially Pradyot Bikram Manikya Deb Barman, talked about the tribals. Now a resolution has been passed in the council session saying that Greater Tipraland is for all the people belonging to all caste, creed and religion," Rebati Tripura told IANS over phone from Delhi.

Reati Tripura, who is also the president of the BJP's Tripura unit of Janajati Morcha (tribal front), said that TIPRA Motha leaders should also clear the geographical boundary of their proposed Greater Tipraland. "TIPRA Motha and all other political parties must be sincere and candid about the development of the backward tribals," said the 45-year-old politician.

Nine TTAADC members and the party supported while an Independent member remained silent when the Greater Tipraland resolution was adopted by the council on Friday. Tripura state Congress President Pijush Kanti Biswas said that if the proposal of Greater Tipraland is for the socio-economic development of the tribals and if it is allowed by the Constitution, his party has no objection, but the demand is not practical.

Veteran tribal leader Jitendra Chaudhury, who is also the national coordinator of CPM-backed Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch and the president of the Tripura Rajya Upajati Ganamukti Parishad, a frontal body of the CPI-M, said the concept of Greater Tipraland demand is not clear.

"Before the April 6 elections to the TTAADC, Greater Tipraland demand indicated to form a separate state for the tribals. But the TIPRA Motha leaders are now saying that it is for the socio-economic development of the tribals.

"If the TIPRA Motha wants unity among the tribals, and non-tribals and socio-economic development of the tribals, we can support them but before that they must clear their position," Chaudhury, a former minister and Lok Sabha member, told IANS.

There are 10 autonomous district councils (ADCs) in northeast India facilitating the socio-economic development of tribals, who make up 27-28 per cent of the region's total population of around 45.58 million.

Of the 10 ADCs, constituted under the Sixth and Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution, three each are in Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram and one in Tripura. The Manipur government had constituted six ADCs for the overall development of the tribals.

Though the Central government had abrogated Article 370 that had accorded special status to the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir, there are many special provisions in the Indian Constitution under

Articles 371 (A), 371 (B), 371 (C), 371 (G), 371 (H) and 244 to preserve the traditions, culture and the overall development of the tribals.

Besides, the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system is in force in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and on December 11, 2019, it was promulgated in Manipur to allow for inward travel of Indian citizens into the ILP enforced areas for a stipulated period with the written permission of the state authority.

Agitations were on since 2019 in Meghalaya to promulgate the ILP, which is in operation under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873. The Central government had earlier announced that the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 (CAA) would not apply to the ILP and the ADC governed areas of the northeastern states.

According to the 2011 census, tribals constitute 60 per cent and above of the population in four of the eight northeastern states - Mizoram (94.4 per cent), Nagaland (86.5 per cent), Meghalaya (86.1 per cent) and Arunachal Pradesh (68.8 per cent) while a reasonable tribal population exists in the remaining four states -- Tripura (31.8 per cent), Manipur (35.1 per cent), Sikkim (33.8 per cent) and Assam (12.4 per cent).