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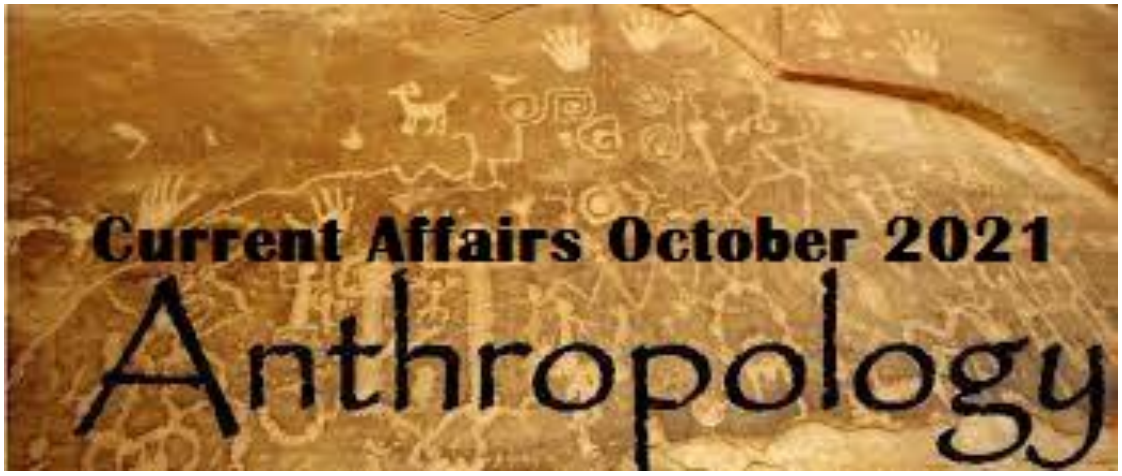

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PHYSICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Study highlights need to replace 'ancestry' in forensics with something more accurate

A new study finds forensics researchers use terms related to ancestry and race in inconsistent ways, and calls for the discipline to adopt a new approach to better account for both the fluidity of populations and how historical events have shaped our skeletal characteristics.

"Forensic anthropology is a science, and we need to use terms consistently," says Ann Ross, corresponding author of the study and a professor of biological sciences at North Carolina State University. "Our study both highlights our discipline's challenges in discussing issues of ancestral origin consistently, and suggests that focusing on population affinity would be a way forward."

Race is a social construct -- there's no scientific basis for it. Population affinity, in the context of forensic anthropology, is determined by the skeletal characteristics associated with groups of people. Those characteristics are shaped by historic events and forces such as gene flow, migration, and so on. What's more, these population groups can be very fluid.

In practical terms, that this means that race can be wildly misleading in a forensic context. For example, a missing person may have been listed as Black on their driver's license because of their skin color. But their skeletal remains may not indicate they were of African descent, because their bone structure may reflect other aspects of their ancestry.

"Like many disciplines, forensic anthropology has been coming to terms with issues regarding race," Ross says. "Some people in the discipline want to do away completely with assessing an individual's place of origin. Others say that conventional approaches still have value in helping to identify human remains.

"In this paper, we are recommending a third path. This study is focused on finding ways to evaluate human variation that give us valuable information in forensic and anthropological contexts, but that avoid clinging to the use of outdated defaults such as race."

In one part of the study, the researchers looked at all of the papers published in the Journal of Forensic Sciences between 2009 and 2019 that referenced ancestry,

race or related terms. The goal of this content analysis was to determine if the terms were being used consistently within the field. And they were not.

"The Journal of Forensic Sciences is the flagship journal for forensic sciences in the U.S., and even there we found inconsistencies in how our field uses these terms," Ross says. "Inconsistent terminology opens the door to confusion, misunderstanding and misuse within the discipline."

In a second part of the study, the researchers used geometric morphometric data and spatial analysis methods to evaluate the validity of terms such as "European" or "African" to describe the ancestral origin of human remains.

Altogether, the researchers evaluated nine datasets, comprising data on 397 people. The datasets were of human remains collected in Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Panama, Puerto Rico, Peru, Spain and a population of enslaved Africans that had been buried in Cuba. All of the remains, except for those of the enslaved Africans, were from the 20th or 21st centuries.

"Regarding the data we have on the remains of enslaved Africans, we want to acknowledge the value that data collected from such samples can contribute to discussions of human variation, while also noting that the history and ethics of human skeletal collections, in general, is often dubious," Ross says. "Such body harvesting all too often occurred under the umbrella of scientific racism, without the permission of the deceased or next of kin, and disproportionately targeted marginalized populations."

In their review of recent papers, the researchers found that forensics experts often still referred to remains as being of African, Asian or European origin.

"But our analysis of these nine datasets shows that this approach is wrong, because it's not that simple," Ross says.

"Let's use Panama as an example," says Ross, who is from Panama. "There have been huge movements of people into this area from all over the world over the past 500 years: indigenous peoples who predate colonialism, colonizers from Europe, slaves from Africa, immigrants from Asia. The contemporary remains we see in Panama reflect all of those influences."

Ross also noted that the analysis of the nine datasets also highlighted a flaw in the contemporary idea of "clines." The idea of clines is basically that, while there are changes from one group of people to another, populations who are

geographically close to each other are more similar than populations that are geographically distant. However, the researchers found that this assumption can be misleading.

For example, Panama and Colombia share a border, but very different historical forces have acted on Panama and Colombia in recent centuries -- so the skeletal characteristics of remains from those two countries are much less similar than one would anticipate.

"All of this is important for multiple reasons, such as taking meaningful steps to reduce racism in our field, and ensuring that we are communicating clearly with each other within the discipline," Ross says. "It is also important because marginalized people are most often the people whose remains go unidentified. Labeling them as 'Hispanic' or 'Black' is misleading. We, as forensic anthropologists, need to change the way we think about origin. We need to begin thinking about physical markers in the context of population affinity and how we can use that to both communicate clearly and to help understand who we are seeing when we work with unidentified remains. We need to ensure that we are not contributing -- even inadvertently -- to structural inequities and racism.

"This also means that we are faced with a wide range of new research questions. As a field, much of our work has focused on looking at data from the remains of historic populations. I think we need to begin doing more work that can help us better understand the ways in which historical events have helped to shape the skeletal characteristics of modern populations."

2. An Indigenous people in the Philippines have the most Denisovan DNA

Indigenous Ayta Magbukon people get 5 percent of their DNA from the mysterious ancient hominids

Denisovans are an elusive bunch, known mainly from ancient DNA samples and traces of that DNA that the ancient hominids shared when they interbred with *Homo sapiens*. They left their biggest genetic imprint on people who now live in Southeast Asian islands, nearby Papua New Guinea and Australia. Genetic evidence now shows that a Philippine Negrito ethnic group has inherited the most Denisovan ancestry of all. Indigenous people known as the Ayta

Magbukon get around 5 percent of their DNA from Denisovans, a new study finds.

This finding fits an evolutionary scenario in which two or more Stone Age Denisovan populations independently reached various Southeast Asian islands, including the Philippines and a landmass that consisted of what's now Papua New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania. Exact arrival dates are unknown, but nearly 200,000-year-old stone tools found on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi may have been made by Denisovans (*SN*: 1/13/16). *H. sapiens* groups that started arriving around 50,000 years ago or more then interbred with resident Denisovans.

Evolutionary geneticists Maximilian Larena and Mattias Jakobsson, both at Uppsala University in Sweden, and their team describe the new evidence August 12 in *Current Biology*.

Even as the complexities of ancient interbreeding in Southeast Asia become clearer, Denisovans remain a mysterious crowd. "It's unclear how the different Denisovan groups on the mainland and on Southeast Asian islands were related [to each other] and how genetically diverse they were," Jakobsson says.

Papua New Guinea highlanders — estimated to carry close to 4 percent Denisovan DNA in the new study — were previously thought to be the modern record holders for Denisovan ancestry. But the Ayta Magbukon display roughly 30 percent to 40 percent more Denisovan ancestry than Papua New Guinea highlanders and Indigenous Australians, Jakobsson says. That calculation accounts for recent mating of East Asians with Philippine Negrito groups, including the Ayta Magbukon, that diluted Denisovan inheritance to varying degrees.

Genetic analyses suggest that Ayta Magbukon people retain slightly more Denisovan ancestry than other Philippine Negrito groups due to having mated less often with East Asian migrants to the island around 2,281 years ago, the scientists say. Their genetic analyses compared ancient DNA from Denisovans and Neandertals with that of 1,107 individuals from 118 ethnic groups in the Philippines, including 25 Negrito populations. Comparisons were then made to previously collected DNA from present-day Papua New Guinea highlanders and Indigenous Australians.

The new report underscores that "still today there are populations that have not been fully genetically described and that Denisovans were geographically widespread," says paleogeneticist Cosimo Posth of the University of Tübingen in Germany, who was not part of the new research.

But it's too early to say whether Stone Age *Homo* fossils found on Southeast Asian islands come from Denisovans, populations that interbred with Denisovans or other *Homo* lineages, Posth says. Only DNA extracted from those fossils can resolve that issue, he adds. Unfortunately, ancient DNA preserves poorly in fossils from tropical climates.

Only a handful of confirmed Denisovan fossils exist. Those consist of a few fragmentary specimens from a Siberian cave where Denisovans lived from around 300,000 to 50,000 years ago (*SN: 1/30/19*), and a roughly 160,000-year-old partial jaw found on the Tibetan Plateau (*SN: 5/1/19*).

Fossils from the Philippines initially classed as *H. luzonensis*, dating to 50,000 years ago or more (*SN: 4/10/19*), might actually represent Denisovans. But a lack of consensus on what Denisovans looked like leaves the evolutionary identity of those fossils uncertain.

Larena and Jakobsson's findings "further increase my suspicions that Denisovan fossils are hiding in plain sight" among previously excavated discoveries on Southeast Asian islands, says population geneticist João Teixeira of the University of Adelaide in Australia, who did not participate in the new study.

Denisovans may have genetically encompassed *H. luzonensis* and two other fossil hominids found on different Southeast Asian islands, *H. floresiensis* on Flores and *H. erectus* on Java, Teixeira suspects. *H. floresiensis*, or hobbits, survived from at least 100,000 years ago to around 60,000 years ago (*SN: 6/8/16*). *H. erectus* arrived on Java about 1.6 million years ago and died out between 117,000 and 108,000 years ago (*SN: 12/18/19*).

Geographic ancestry patterns on Southeastern Asian islands and in Australia suggest that this region was settled by a genetically distinct Denisovan population from southern parts of mainland East Asia, Teixeira and his colleagues reported in the May *Nature Ecology & Evolution*.

3. Remains of nine Neanderthals found in cave south of Rome

Italian archaeologists believe most of Neanderthals were killed by hyenas then dragged back to den

Italian archaeologists have unearthed the bones of nine Neanderthals who were allegedly hunted and mauled by hyenas in their den about 100km south-east of Rome.

Scientists from the Archaeological Superintendency of Latina and the University of Tor Vergata in Rome said the remains belong to seven adult males and one female, while another are those of a young boy.

Experts believe the individuals lived in different time periods. Some bones could be as old as 50,000 to 68,000 years, whereas the most ancient remains are believed to be 100,000 years old.

The Neanderthal remains, which include skullcaps and broken jawbones, were found in the Guattari cave, which had already gained notoriety for the presence of fossils of these distant human cousins, which were found by chance in 1939. Since then, no further human remains had been uncovered in Guattari.

A frontal view of a female skull and a right hand thumb metacarpal bone are among the fossilised remains. Photograph: Italian Ministry of Culture/AFP/Getty

"It is a spectacular find," said Mario Rolfo, professor of archaeology at Tor Vergata University. "A collapse, perhaps caused by an earthquake, sealed this cave for more than 60,000 years, thereby preserving the remains left inside for tens of thousands of years."

Researchers found traces of vegetables alongside human remains and those of rhinoceroses, giant deer, wild horses and, of course, ferocious hyenas.

According to the researchers, most of the Neanderthals had been killed by hyenas and then dragged back to the cave they had transformed into their den. Once inside, the animals consumed their prey.

Ancient human migration into Europe revealed via genome analysis

"Neanderthals were prey for these animals," said Rolfo. "Hyenas hunted them, especially the most vulnerable, like sick or elderly individuals."

Even before these ferocious predators took possession of the cave, experts do not exclude the possibility that Neanderthals had at one time made it their home.

Rolfo has announced that his team of researchers intended to analyse the DNA of these individuals to understand their ways of life and history.

A preliminary analysis of dental tartar has revealed that their diet was varied. They primarily consumed cereals, which contributed to the growth of their brains.

"It is an extraordinary discovery that the whole world will talk about," said Italy's culture minister, Dario Franceschini. "These findings will help to enrich studies on Neanderthals."

Neanderthals inhabited Eurasia, from the Atlantic coast to the Ural mountains, from about 400,000 years ago until a little after 40,000 years ago, disappearing after our species established itself in the region. Last year, remains and tools found in Bulgaria, revealed that modern humans and Neanderthals were present at the same time in Europe for several thousand years, giving them ample time for biological and cultural interaction.

Often portrayed as the simple, stocky relatives of modern humans, Neanderthals had, in fact, similar brains and developed a rich culture. Beyond their complex stone tools and painted jewellery, the Neanderthals used to adorn caves in art,

leaving hand stencils behind for modern humans to ponder long after they died out.

4. 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."

5. Early Homo sapiens groups in Europe faced subarctic climates

New insights into the climatic backdrop for an early wave of dispersal of our species into Europe during the last glacial period

The process how our species dispersed into new environments at that time represents an important evolutionary turning point that ultimately led to *Homo sapiens* populating all continents and a large diversity of climate zones and environments. The mechanisms that facilitated initial waves of expansion remain debated, but a majority of models based on the correlation of archaeological sites with spatially distant climatic archives has so far indicated that human groups relied on warmer climatic conditions to spread into new, more northern, environments.

Using evidence directly from the archaeological layers of Bacho Kiro Cave the Max Planck team was now able to show that humans have been enduring very cold climatic conditions, similar to the ones typical for present-day northern Scandinavia, for several thousand years. "Our evidence shows that these human groups were more flexible with regard to the environments they used and more adaptable to different climatic conditions than previously thought," says lead author Sarah Pederzani, a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and the University of Aberdeen. Jean-Jacques Hublin, director of the Department of Human Evolution at the Max Planck Institute, adds: "Using these new insights, new models of the spread of our species across Eurasia will now need to be constructed, taking into account their higher degree of climatic flexibility."

Archaeological materials from Bacho Kiro Cave in Bulgaria

By directly using archaeological materials, such as the remains of herbivores butchered by humans, to generate climatic data the palaeoclimate research team -- led by Pederzani and Kate Britton, also a researcher at Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and the University of Aberdeen -- was able to establish a very robust record of local climatic conditions that specifically relates to the times when humans were inhabiting Bacho Kiro Cave.

"This technique enables a more confident assignment of local climatic context compared to the more commonly used chronological correlation between archaeological data and climatic archives from different localities that formed the basis of much of the existing research on human climatic adaptability -- it really gives us insight into what life was like 'on the ground'," says Britton. "However, due to the time consuming nature of the analysis and the reliance on the availability of particular animal remains, oxygen isotope studies or other ways of generating climatic data directly from archaeological sites remain scarce for the time period when *Homo sapiens* first spread across Eurasia," adds Pederzani. Indeed, this Max Planck study is the first study conducted in the context of the Initial Upper Palaeolithic and could therefore yield such surprising results.

Highly resolved record of past temperatures spanning more than 7,000 years

Pederzani spent one year conducting lab work from drilling series of small samples from the animal teeth through wet chemistry preparation and stable isotope ratio mass spectrometry to obtain all the necessary data. "Through this time intensive analysis that included a total of 179 samples, it was possible to obtain a very highly resolved record of past temperatures, including summer, winter and mean annual temperature estimates for human occupations spanning more than 7,000 years," says Pederzani.

Renewed excavations at Bacho Kiro Cave conducted by an international team led by Max Planck researchers Jean-Jacques Hublin, Tsenka Tsanova and Shannon McPherron, and Nikolay Sirakov of the National Institute of Archaeology with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in Sofia, Bulgaria, started in 2015 and have yielded a rich archaeological record of human activity at the cave including the remnants of occupations that represent the earliest known occurrence of Upper Palaeolithic *Homo sapiens* in Europe. Deposits in the lower portion of the site contained a large number of animal bones, stone tools, pendants and even human fossils and formed the basis of the climatic study to investigate the environmental conditions that humans experienced when they first spread into Southeast Europe from the Levant.

6. India hosted youngest populations of 'Acheulean' human ancestors: study

The study illuminates the environmental conditions that allowed Acheulean populations to thrive at the margins of the monsoon in the Thar Desert until at least 177,000 years ago.

Populations of ancient humans using Acheulean stone toolkits persisted in India until about 177,000 years ago, shortly before the earliest expansions of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, across Asia, according to a study published on Wednesday.

The longest lasting tool-making tradition in prehistory, known as the Acheulean, was characterised by distinctive oval and pear-shaped stone handaxes and cleavers associated with Homo erectus and derived species such as *Homo heidelbergensis*.

Latest research led by the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History in Germany re-examined a key Acheulean site at the margins of the monsoon zone in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan.

The study, published in the journal *Scientific Reports*, shows the presence of Acheulean populations until about 177,000 years ago, shortly before the earliest expansions of Homo sapiens across Asia.

The timing and route of the earliest expansions of our own species across Asia have been the focus of considerable debate. However, a growing body of evidence indicates *Homo sapiens* interacted with numerous populations of our closest evolutionary cousins, the researchers said.

Identifying where these different populations met is critical to revealing the human and cultural landscape encountered by the earliest members of our species to expand beyond Africa, they said.

The researchers noted that although fossils of ancient human populations are extremely rare in South Asia, changes in the stone tool kits they made, used, and left behind can help resolve when and where these encounters may have occurred.

The latest research reports the relatively recent occupation of the site of Singi Talav by Acheulean populations up to 177,000 years ago.

The site was once thought to be amongst the oldest Acheulean sites in India, but now appears to be one of the youngest, according to the researchers. These dates show the persistence of Acheulean populations in the Thar Desert after their disappearance in eastern Africa around 214,000 years ago and Arabia 190,000 years ago, they noted.

The study illuminates the environmental conditions that allowed Acheulean populations to thrive at the margins of the monsoon in the Thar Desert until at least 177,000 years ago.

"This supports evidence from across the region indicating that India hosted the youngest populations using Acheulean toolkits across the world," said Jimbob Blinkhorn of the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, the lead author of the study. "Critically, the late persistence of the Acheulean at Singi Talav and elsewhere in India directly precedes evidence for the appearance of our own species, Homo sapiens, as they expanded across Asia," Blinkhorn added.

The researchers noted that the site of Singi Talav, set on a lakeside close to the modern town of Didwana at the edge of the Thar Desert, was first excavated in the early 1980's, revealing multiple stone tool assemblages.

The largest assemblage shows a focus on the production of stone handaxes and cleavers that are typical of the Acheulean, they said. However, the techniques needed to accurately date these assemblages were not available at the time of their discovery.

"The lakeside setting has ideal preservation conditions for an archaeological site, enabling us to return 30 years after the first excavation and readily re-identify the main occupation horizons again," said Blinkhorn.

The researchers used luminescence methods to directly date the sediment horizons occupied by ancient human populations. These methods rely on the ability of minerals like quartz and feldspar to store and release energy induced by natural radioactivity, allowing scientists to determine the last time sediments were exposed to light.

"Ours is the first study to directly date the occupation horizons at Singi Talav, enabling us to understand both when ancient humans lived here and created the stone tool assemblages, and how these occupations compare with other sites across the region," said Julie Durcan of the University of Oxford in the UK.

The Thar Desert sits at the western edge of the modern Indian summer monsoon system, and its habitability to ancient human populations likely fluctuated significantly. The researchers examined plant microfossils, known as phytoliths, as well as features of soil geochemistry to reveal the ecology of the site at the time the Acheulean toolkits were produced.

"This is the first time the ecology of an Acheulean site in India has been studied using these methods, revealing the broader character of the landscape that these populations inhabited," said Professor Hema Achyuthan of Anna University, Chennai, who also participated in the excavations at the site. "The results from the two methods we applied complement each other to reveal a landscape rich in the types of grasses that flourish during periods with enhanced summer monsoons," Achyuthan added.

SOCIO – CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

7. Neanderthal artists? Our ancestors decorated bones over 50,000 years ago

Discovery from Unicorn Cave in Lower Saxony sheds new light on ancestors' cognitive abilities

Newswise — Since the discovery of the first fossil remains in the 19th century, the image of the Neanderthal has been one of a primitive hominin. People have known for a long time that Neanderthals were able to effectively fashion tools and weapons. But could they also make ornaments, jewellery or even art? A research team led by the University of Göttingen and the Lower Saxony State Office for Heritage has analysed a new find from the Unicorn Cave (Einhornhöhle) in the Harz Mountains. The researchers conclude that, in fact, Neanderthals, genetically the closest relative to modern humans, had remarkable cognitive abilities. The results of the study were published in Nature Ecology and Evolution.

Working with the Unicornu Fossile society, the scientists have been carrying out new excavations at the Unicorn Cave in the Harz Mountains since 2019. For the first time, they succeeded in uncovering well-preserved layers of cultural artefacts from the Neanderthal period in the cave's ruined entrance area. Among the preserved remains from a hunt, an inconspicuous foot bone turned out to be a sensational discovery. After removing the soil sticking to the bone, an angular pattern of six notches was revealed. "We quickly realised that these were not marks made from butchering the animal but were clearly decorative," says the excavation leader Dr Dirk Leder of the Lower Saxony State Office for Heritage. The carved notches could then be analysed with 3D microscopy at the Department of Wood Biology and Wood Products at Göttingen University.

To make a scientific comparison, the team carried out experiments with the foot bones of today's cattle. They showed that the bone probably had to be boiled first in order to carve the pattern into the softened bone surface with stone tools and the work would take about 1.5 hours. The small ancient foot bone that had been discovered was identified as coming from a giant deer (Megaloceros giganteus). "It is probably no coincidence that the Neanderthal chose the bone of an impressive animal with huge antlers for his or her carving," says Professor Antje Schwalb from the Technical University of Braunschweig, who is involved in the project.

The team of Leibniz laboratory at Kiel University dated the carved bone at over 51,000 years using radiocarbon dating technology. This is the first time that anyone has successfully directly dated an object that must have been carved by Neanderthals. Until now, a few ornamental objects from the time of the last Neanderthals in France were known. However, these finds, which are about 40,000 years old, are considered by many to be copies of pendants made by anatomically modern humans because by this time they had already spread to parts of Europe. Decorative objects and small ivory sculptures have survived from cave sites of modern humans on the Swabian Alb in Baden-Württemberg and these were found at about the same time.

"The fact that the new find from the Unicorn Cave dates from so long ago shows that Neanderthals were already able to independently produce patterns on bones and probably also communicate using symbols thousands of years before the arrival of modern humans in Europe," says project leader Professor Thomas Terberger from Göttingen University's Department for Prehistory and Early History, and the Lower Saxony State Office for Heritage. "This means that the creative talents of the Neanderthals must have developed independently. The

bone from the Unicorn Cave thus represents the oldest decorated object in Lower Saxony and one of the most important finds from the Neanderthal period in Central Europe."

Lower Saxony's Minister of Science Björn Thümler says: "Lower Saxony's archaeologists are always making discoveries that rewrite the history books. Now, research in the Unicorn Cave has revealed that the Neanderthals produced elaborate designs even before the arrival of modern humans - yet another important new finding that completely revises our picture of prehistory."

8. Widespread cultural diffusion of knowledge started 400 thousand years ago

Different groups of hominins probably learned from one another much earlier than was previously thought, and that knowledge was also distributed much further. A study by archaeologists at Leiden University on the use of fire shows that 400,000 years ago knowledge and skills must already have been exchanged via social networks. The discovery was published in *PNAS* on 19 July.

"To date it was always thought that cultural diffusion actually started only 70,000 years ago when modern humans, Homo sapiens, started to disperse. But the record for the use of fire now seems to show that this happened much earlier," archaeologist and researcher Katharine MacDonald explains.

Together with Wil Roebroeks, professor of the Evolution of the Human Niche, archaeologist Fulco Scherjon, research master's student Eva van Veen, and Krist Vaesen, associate professor in the Philosophy of Innovation at Eindhoven University of Technology, MacDonald conducted research on the traces of fire made by hominins at archaeological sites in various places throughout the world. "We started to look differently at the data from decades of archaeological research."

Cultural diffusion

Cultural diffusion is the widespread distribution of objects, techniques or particular practices by people or hominins. Examples include children's songs or rhymes. Whether they are sung by a child in the United States in English or in Europe in a European language, they often sound the same. This is because

people have passed knowledge of the melody and also, for example, the clapping rhythm via a learning process.

At many of those sites—in Israel and in Africa, Europe and possibly also China—the researchers found comparable traces, or combinations of traces, such as charcoal, carbonized bones and stones that had been subjected to heat. "We don't think that these similarities could be caused because early predecessors of humans themselves traveled great distances, or that they developed particular techniques separately from one another, for example because the human brain underwent sudden growth. There are no indications at all for that," MacDonald explains. The only other possibility is that different groups of hominins passed on these techniques and knowledge of raw materials to one another, and that primitive social networks must have existed.

The theory of the research team is supported by archaeological finds of a particular type of stone tool from a somewhat later period. These tools made using what is known as the Levallois technique pop up during a very short period in an increasing number of places in the Old World. There are also genetic traces that show that different hominin populations must have been in contact with one another.

Anthropology, primatology and social sciences

The researchers looked not only at archaeological evidence for the spread of the use of fire, but also at what is needed to exchange such knowledge. They therefore needed to know in what ways particular types of hominins could have been in social contact with one another. MacDonald: "It became a strongly interdisciplinary study. Besides archaeological data, we also integrated knowledge from anthropology, primatology and the social sciences. That's something I'm very proud of."

"Exciting and at the same time terrifying," is how MacDonald describes the publication of the research findings in scientific journal *PNAS*. "We worked on the article for a year and a half; it was completely rewritten twice and we shared it with just a couple of colleagues. But now the whole world can read it and there will no doubt be people who don't agree with us."

Still, she hopes that the article will lead to new questions in archaeology and other scientific disciplines. For MacDonald, the most important question is: what was it that made widespread cultural diffusion possible 400,000 years ago? "I

hope we can change the discussion surrounding fire use by hominins. That we look more at what the use of fire meant for human development and how that related to social change."

INDIAN & TRIBAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Kongthong Whistling Village in Northeast India

It is a village where people usually do not use entire tune but only the whisper when they call each other in the village. However, when they are out in the fields to work, they only just use their special tune to communicate each other, the duration of which is not more than a minute, is used.

The grace of the village is under highlight of several peoples after the name quoted in the parliament when Rajya Shaba Member " Prof Rakesh Singha" toured at the village on 14 Aug 2019.
He appealed that the village to be included in intangible cultural heritage of UNESCO as he is concerned that the unique cultural practice could be disappeared if not included in Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO.

Kongthong a small village is nestled in the Khat-ar Shnong area on way to Sohra in East Khasi Hills, district of Meghalaya 60kms to the south from Shillong in India is a must visit for its panoramic view, unique culture and virgin beauty. There is no sign boards to guide you, you will find lack of road connectivity giving you an offroading feeling . It takes around 4 hr from Shillong to reach this place.

The village resides a population of around 650 residents, magically those 650 inhabitants has their own unique tune composed by their mother. When a person dies, the song dies. Nobody uses the same tune even after the death.

They are always in touch with nature. They believe god is unseen but he is there taking care of the world. They have extreme love and respect for nature.

One more different practice of this village is earlier people here were uneducated so during those times if somebody purchased or sold their land it was difficult to keep a record of it. They used to follow a different system where in they used to

erect a stone in the presence of members of village durbar and the parties selling and buying land. The stone would stand as evidence to both the families that the land is sold to a particular family and can't be taken back. They call it 'Mausakhi' in khasi, mau means stone and sakhi means evidence.

Apart from these practices, the village has a football pitch, a place for community gathering where they perform their festival and cultural dance. Village has no hospital or police station but a dispensary and school till grade 8. The crime rate here is 0 making it safe to live here. People here are very simple, gentle, polite, warm and extremely hospitable.

WAY OF COMMUNICATING

The village is also known as "Whistling Village" as every individual there has their unique caller tune. They call this tune "Jingrwai Lawbei" which means mother's love song. In Kongthong village, when a child is born mother hums whiper a tune for the child which they are inspired by birds. As the child grows this tune becomes his caller tune, and he is called by that tune. Also each and other inhabitants knows each other's tune.

"Jingrwai Lawbei" is like a secret code for every individual in this village which cannot be copied. If a person is somewhere far which cannot be seen with eyes, this tune is used to communicate among each other and the person understands that he is needed somewhere and responds. The person calling might have something to speak or need to come with them or they just want to know if he is there or no. Nobody can respond on behalf of anybody.

With a very practical theory that high frequency sound travel longer distance in less time, people of Kong thong have been following this culture since decades now.
Take days out of your busy city life visit this beautiful place, living there would give you experience which no other part in world would give you.

EXPERIENCING AT KONGTHONG

Kongthong is an amazing place. The best thing you can do here is to understand and know the villagers and their lifestyle. Listen to the people being called out by whistles.

Apart from that, being tucked away from the rest of the world, the village is untouched and pristine. You can definitely find this place to be serene and totally away from the maddening crowd of the city. Enjoy this serenity and nature around you.

You can also indulge in activities like kite flying, swimming, hiking and bird watching. Listen to Khasi fables around bonfire while enjoying Khasi dishes..

BEST TIME TO VISIT KONGTHONG WHISTELING VILLAGE

At Meghalaya, you can never actually predict the weather. But usually, October to April has clear skies and best weather. You can make a week-long plan if you want to visit the important places of Meghalaya.
Kong thong also serves as a perfect weekend destination for you.

HOW TO REACH KONGTHONG WHISTELING

The nearest airport is Umroi Airport at Shillong. The nearest Railway head is Guwahati. From Guwahati, you have to reach Shillong either by shared sumos and car, or you can hire a cab

From Shillong, the place is around 55 km. You can hire a car from Shillong to reach here. To reach Kong thong, you have to trek from the last point on the motor able road. The village is not connected by proper roads and can only be arrived by a 10 km trek.

HISTORY

According to the Legends, Once a man went alone in Jungle for timber, climbed a tree to get rid of the thugs who was following him then he started calling his friends by whistling and making sounds so that the goons get unaware of him. Thereupon he was rescued by his friends.

Since then the practice of whistling and making sounds to communicate has been evolved. It soon became a maternal practice for mothers when they started giving distinctive sounds to their kids which becomes their identity when they grow elder.

2. Rabari, Bharvad and Charan of Gujarat

Recently, the **Gujarat government** has decided to form a **five-member commission** to identify members of **Rabari, Bharvad and Charan** communities, who are eligible for benefits of **Schedule Tribe (ST) status.**

Key Points

- **Issue:**
  - In **October 1956,** the **central government conferred ST status** on people of **Rabari, Bharvad and Charan** communities, living in ***nesses*** (tiny, oval-shaped hutments made of mud) of **Gir, Barda and Alech areas** of Gujarat.
  - However, it has been alleged that a number of **people not living in *nesses*** have managed to **get ST certificates** and are **enjoying undue reservation benefits,** mainly in government jobs.
  - Leaders of these three communities and other communities as well, have been **protesting** for quite some time against this.
- **Objective of the Commission:**
  - To **resolve this issue and identify the legitimate beneficiaries** of ST status among the members of the three communities.
  - To **ensure** that the eligible members of the tribes are **not devoid of their right** and the **others do not get an undue benefit** in their names.
- **Composition:**
  - The five-member commission will comprise a retired judge of the high court as the head, two district judges, one retired forest officer and one retired revenue officer.

Rabari

- They **migrated from Rajasthan** via Kutch and now most of them live in the Okhamandal region of Jamnagar district.
- They speak ***'Bhopa'*** which is a **mixture of Gujarati, Kachchi, Marwari words and Pharasi** (Persian) and use **Gujarati script.**
- **Women stand in almost equal status** to that of men.
- The main economic activity is **sheep breeding and selling of milk.** Only a few of them own cultivable **agricultural land.** Recently, they have started engaging as **wage labourers in industrial establishments** both as skilled and unskilled labourers.
- They profess **Hinduism** and are followers of **Shiva and Shakti.**
- Their folk songs are called ***'Siya'.***

Bharvad

- The term Bharwad is a modified form of the word ***'Badawad'.***

    - 'Bada' means sheep and 'Wada' refers to compound or enclosure. The person who possesses compounds or pens is known as Badawad.
- They **communicate in Gujarati** and use **Gujarati script.**
- Bharwad **women have a lower status.**
- The Bharwads are **pastorals** who are permitted to graze their sheep and cattle in certain demarcated areas of the reserved forest. Some of them **possess dry agricultural land** and earn their livelihood as **agricultural labourers.**
- They profess **Hinduism** and **Krishna** is considered the supreme God.

Charan

- The Charan, also called **Gadhvi,** is a small tribe in Gujarat and the name Charan is derived from the word ***'Char'*** which means **grazing.**
- They **speak Gujarati** and use **Gujarati script.**
- They **marry within their community** and **practice monogamy.**
- The Charans are traditionally **cattle breeders.** They have also **adopted agriculture as their secondary occupation.**
- They profess **Hinduism** and the main deity is **Pithorai Mata.**

Scheduled Tribes

- As per **Census 1931,** Schedule tribes are termed as **'backward tribes'** living in the **'Excluded'** and **'Partially Excluded'** areas.
    - The Constitution **does not define the criteria for recognition** of Scheduled Tribes and hence the definition contained in 1931 Census was used in initial years after independence.
- The **Government of India Act, 1935** called for the first time for representatives of 'backward tribes' in provincial assemblies.
- **Article 366 (25)** of the Constitution **only provides a process to define** Scheduled Tribes:
    - Scheduled Tribes means such tribes, tribal communities, parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under **Article 342** to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of the Constitution.
    - **Article 342 (1):** The President may with respect to any State or Union Territory, and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor, by a public notification, specify the tribes or tribal

communities or part of or groups within tribes or tribal communities as Scheduled Tribe in relation to that State or Union Territory.

- The category of **'tribe'** entails a **social and cultural dimension** but the **'schedule tribe'** category has **political-administrative implications.**
- A majority of the ST population is **concentrated in the eastern, central and western belt** covering the nine states of **Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal.**
    - About **12%** inhabit the **North-eastern region,** about **5%** in the **Southern region** and about **3%** in the **Northern states.**
- The **Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Second Amendment) Bill, 2019** will amend **Part VI of the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes)** Order, 1950 that specifies the tribal and tribal communities which are deemed to be Scheduled Tribes.
- **Other Constitutional Provisions:**
    - **Article 15 (4):** Special provisions for advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) or the STs.
    - **Article 16 (4):** Enables the state to make any provision for reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the state, is not adequately represented in the services under the state.
    - **Article 46:** Promotion of educational and economic interests of SCs, STs and other weaker sections.
    - **Article 330 and 332:** Provides for specific representation through reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the Parliament and in the State Legislative Assemblies respectively.
    - **Article 338 A:** Gives powers to the **National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST)** to oversee the implementation of various safeguards provided to STs.

3. Initiatives to Promote Tribal Culture

The **Ministry of Tribal Affairs** is administrating the **schemes of "Support of Tribal Research Institute" and "Tribal Festival, Research, Information and Mass Education"** under which various activities to promote tribal culture have been undertaken.

- The schemes aim to ensure quality and uniformity in research works, evaluation studies, training, awareness generation among tribals, showcasing of rich tribal heritage including languages, habitats and cultivation and production practices.

Key Points

- **Key Highlights:**
  - **Museum for Tribal Freedom Fighters:**
    - To acknowledge the heroic and patriotic deeds of tribal people, the Ministry has sanctioned setting up 10 Tribal Freedom Fighters Museum.
  - **Documentation of Indigenous Practices:**
    - Research and documentation of Indigenous practices by tribal healers and medicinal plants, Adivasi Languages, agriculture system, dances and paintings etc.
  - **Digital Repository:**

        - To preserve and promote rich tribal cultural heritage and also to create awareness among others, a searchable digital repository has been developed.
    - **Funding for Tribal Festivals:**
        - The Ministry gives funding to **TRIFED** (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India) for organizing **Adi Mahotsav** festivals at National level and state level.
- **Other Initiatives Related to Tribals:**
    - **Digital Transformation of Tribal Schools:** In the first phase, 250 EMRS schools have been adopted by Microsoft, out of which 50 EMRS schools will be given intensive training and 500 master trainers would be trained.
    - **Development of PVTGs:** It covers **75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)** for their comprehensive socio-economic development.
    - **Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana:** It is a market-linked tribal entrepreneurship development program for forming clusters of tribal Self Help Groups (SHGs) and strengthening them into Tribal Producer Companies.

TRIFED

- It is a **national-level apex organization** functioning under the administrative control of the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs.**
- TRIFED acts as a facilitator and service provider for tribes to sell their product.
- TRIFED aims to empower tribal people with knowledge, tools and pool of information so that they can undertake their operations in a more systematic and scientific manner.
- It organises **Tribal Artisan Melas (TAMs)** to identify new artisans and new products at the sourcing level in States/Districts/Villages for expanding the tribal producers base.
- It is also involved in **MSP** for **MFP** and **TRIFOOD** Schemes.

4. Marriage an alien notion for Indian tribe

Live-in relationships are the norm in Garasia community where women retain a high status in western state of Rajasthan.

Udaipur, India – Live-in relationships between couples who see little reason to marry may be a modern fashion in India's Bollywood film industry, but for one community in India they reflect thousands of years of tradition.

Members of the indigenous Garasia tribe in the northwestern state of Rajasthan have been cohabiting in live-in relationships outside wedlock since time immemorial.

Social scientists studying the arrangement – called *dapa* and recognised through formal rituals – point to a low incidence of rape and dowry deaths in these communities where women retain a high status.

"These tribals, whose livelihood depends on farming and working as labour, marry their live-in partners only when they have sufficient money," said Shahid Pathan, a journalist who has gained an understanding of indigenous customs in the Kotra area.

"Needless to say, that happens much later in their lives, and in absence of money they continue living together for several years and even become parents without the fear of bearing a child out of wedlock."

Joint wedding

It was surprising for many visitors to the wedding of 70-year-old tribal Naniya Garasia to his 60-year-old live-in partner Kaali to discover that not only were his grandchildren present but also his three sons – Mugla, 50, Gana, 40, and Shankar, 35.

Surprise turned to astonishment when they learned that the sons were also marrying their live-in partners – Lakhmi, Masri and Hazari respectively – on the same day.

All four men had been living with their partners for years and their children had all been born out of wedlock, something much of Indian society is yet to accept.

Naniya Garasia with his three sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren. [Shahnawaz Akhtar/ Al Jazeera]

Naniya's second son, Gana, and his partner did not think twice before having four children, nor did Gana's younger brother Shankar, who has three kids.

Live-in relationships of this kind are at the heart of the culture of this tribal group concentrated in the region around Udaipur and Kotra.

The Garasia tribe in Rajasthan and parts of Gujarat holds a fair for their teenage children to befriend partners of their choice – and they then elope with them before returning and living together without having to marry.

When the eloped couple return, the boy's family has to pay a sum to the bride's family before the couple starts to live together outside wedlock.

But therein lies a catch: if they wish, women can seek a new live-in partner at another fair, who is then expected to pay a higher price to the woman's former partner. A similar practice can be found among the Gamars, another Rajasthani tribe.

Unlike the rest of India, women in the Garasia community hold a superior position to men – placing the onus on the man to bear all the expenses for the wedding.

In the marriage of Naniya and his sons, for example, the rituals were performed at the house of the groom whose family had to shoulder all the expenses.

Lesson in democracy

Nonetheless, this ancient custom may be slowly changing.

"The only change that has been made to the age old practice of dapa is that now the verbal agreements between the boy and the girl are being recorded on paper," said the head of Kotra, Gowri Devi.

Despite this concession to modern life, tribal people have little idea about similar live-in relationships among the middle classes of India's large cities and other countries.

"We had no idea that other people also live in this way but it is in our culture and we have been doing it for thousands of years," said Nirmal Singh Garasia, the head of Jodiwad village.

Social scientists who have studied the custom such as Rajiv Gupta believe that the tribal culture of cohabitation is based on a system known as "the right to choose and right to reject".

"They do not find the modern society's marriage system worthy, as it brings with it several impositions, especially on women," said Gupta.

"In tribal society, democracy is deep rooted, whereas the institution of marriage gives superiority to manhood.

"Tribal people are more into practices that give equality to both sides – what democracy actually preaches to us."

The social scientist also revealed that some tribal people practise a custom called *chaadar dalna*, marrying their brother's widow.

Indeed a community considered by so many Indians as backward may even be able to teach mainstream society a few lessons about gender relations – cases of violence against women such as rape and dowry deaths are rare among the Garasia.

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

A look at the last round of NFHS in 2015-2016 corroborates this as it shows that the country's showing on parameters of 'wasted' and 'severely wasted' children had worsened. NEW DELHI: The recently released Global Hunger Index (GHI), which ranked India on the 94th spot among 107 countries, underlines that India's commitment to eliminating hunger and malnutrition leaves much to be desired. A look at the last round of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in 2015-2016 corroborates this as it shows that the country's showing on parameters of 'wasted' and 'severely wasted' children had worsened compared to the previous survey in 2005-06. NFHS-4 was conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, as designated by the Ministry of Health and Family. As compared to NFHS-3, the percentage of wasted children under five years of age had increased from 19.8% to 21% in NFHS-4 (See GFX-1). The percentage of children under five who were 'severely wasted' increased from 6.4% in NFHS-3 to 7.5% in NFHS-4.

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

she said.

"It is essential for policymakers to realise that 'hunger' can be handled even by providing carbohydrate rich staple diets, but 'nutrition' needs proper balance of macro- and micro-nutrients in the diet and a multi-sectoral approach targeting women empowerment and education, tackling poverty and providing sanitation for all," said Bajaj. Sachin Kumar Jain, a representative of Right to Food Campaign, said the SDGs remain restricted to academic discourse with states not adopting target-based approach in planning.

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

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

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

6. India hosted youngest populations of 'Acheulean' human ancestors: study

The study illuminates the environmental conditions that allowed Acheulean populations to thrive at the margins of the monsoon in the Thar Desert until at least 177,000 years ago.

Populations of ancient humans using Acheulean stone toolkits persisted in India until about 177,000 years ago, shortly before the earliest expansions of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, across Asia, according to a study published on Wednesday.

The longest lasting tool-making tradition in prehistory, known as the Acheulean, was characterised by distinctive oval and pear-shaped stone handaxes and cleavers associated with Homo erectus and derived species such as *Homo heidelbergensis*.

Latest research led by the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History in Germany re-examined a key Acheulean site at the margins of the monsoon zone in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan.

The study, published in the journal *Scientific Reports*, shows the presence of Acheulean populations until about 177,000 years ago, shortly before the earliest expansions of Homo sapiens across Asia.

The timing and route of the earliest expansions of our own species across Asia have been the focus of considerable debate. However, a growing body of evidence indicates *Homo sapiens* interacted with numerous populations of our closest evolutionary cousins, the researchers said.

Identifying where these different populations met is critical to revealing the human and cultural landscape encountered by the earliest members of our species to expand beyond Africa, they said.

The researchers noted that although fossils of ancient human populations are extremely rare in South Asia, changes in the stone tool kits they made, used, and left behind can help resolve when and where these encounters may have occurred.

The latest research reports the relatively recent occupation of the site of Singi Talav by Acheulean populations up to 177,000 years ago.

The site was once thought to be amongst the oldest Acheulean sites in India, but now appears to be one of the youngest, according to the researchers. These dates show the persistence of Acheulean populations in the Thar Desert after their disappearance in eastern Africa around 214,000 years ago and Arabia 190,000 years ago, they noted.

The study illuminates the environmental conditions that allowed Acheulean populations to thrive at the margins of the monsoon in the Thar Desert until at least 177,000 years ago.

"This supports evidence from across the region indicating that India hosted the youngest populations using Acheulean toolkits across the world," said Jimbob Blinkhorn of the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, the lead author of the study. "Critically, the late persistence of the Acheulean at Singi Talav and elsewhere in India directly precedes evidence for the appearance of our own species, Homo sapiens, as they expanded across Asia," Blinkhorn added.

The researchers noted that the site of Singi Talav, set on a lakeside close to the modern town of Didwana at the edge of the Thar Desert, was first excavated in the early 1980's, revealing multiple stone tool assemblages.

The largest assemblage shows a focus on the production of stone handaxes and cleavers that are typical of the Acheulean, they said. However, the techniques needed to accurately date these assemblages were not available at the time of their discovery.

"The lakeside setting has ideal preservation conditions for an archaeological site, enabling us to return 30 years after the first excavation and readily re-identify the main occupation horizons again," said Blinkhorn.

The researchers used luminescence methods to directly date the sediment horizons occupied by ancient human populations. These methods rely on the ability of minerals like quartz and feldspar to store and release energy induced by natural radioactivity, allowing scientists to determine the last time sediments were exposed to light.

"Ours is the first study to directly date the occupation horizons at Singi Talav, enabling us to understand both when ancient humans lived here and created the stone tool assemblages, and how these occupations compare with other sites across the region," said Julie Durcan of the University of Oxford in the UK.

The Thar Desert sits at the western edge of the modern Indian summer monsoon system, and its habitability to ancient human populations likely fluctuated significantly. The researchers examined plant microfossils, known as phytoliths, as well as features of soil geochemistry to reveal the ecology of the site at the time the Acheulean toolkits were produced.

"This is the first time the ecology of an Acheulean site in India has been studied using these methods, revealing the broader character of the landscape that these populations inhabited," said Professor Hema Achyuthan of Anna University, Chennai, who also participated in the excavations at the site. "The results from the two methods we applied complement each other to reveal a landscape rich in the types of grasses that flourish during periods with enhanced summer monsoons," Achyuthan added.

7. Gondi language: victim of government neglect

Without active government support, a unique language, connected with the aspirations of the largest forest-dwelling tribal group in India, is unlikely to make much headway in resurrecting itself

The 2011 census says that the total population of the Gond tribe in the country is 11,344,629. The total Gondi speaking population, according to it, is 2,713,790. But according to Gond community leaders and observers, the actual numbers could be much higher, given the fact that huge concentrations of Gondi-speaking people are located in the Naxalite-affected areas of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh; in most of these areas, no census is taking place.

Actual number of Gondi speakers, say community members, is many times the number reflected in the census. Gondwana Ganatantra Party (GPP) president, Hira Singh Markam, says that based on surveys carried out by the party, the total number of people with Gondi as their first language is an estimated 20 million. "Since our surveys, too, have their limitations, the actual numbers could be well above this figure."

Going by sheer numbers – considering the severe limitations faced by census mechanisms – and the vastness of the geographical area over which this language is spoken, social and political groups of the Gond tribal community feel that the language has been unduly ignored by the Indian government, unlike other languages which have undergone a standardisation process and are included in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. None of these processes have been initiated for the Gondi language.

Gondi has also not been included under the Technology Development for Indian Languages (TDIL) programme of the Department of Electronics and Information Technology, which is developing a unicode – a programme for computers, which allows the user to type in any of the 22 Scheduled Indian languages, they rue.

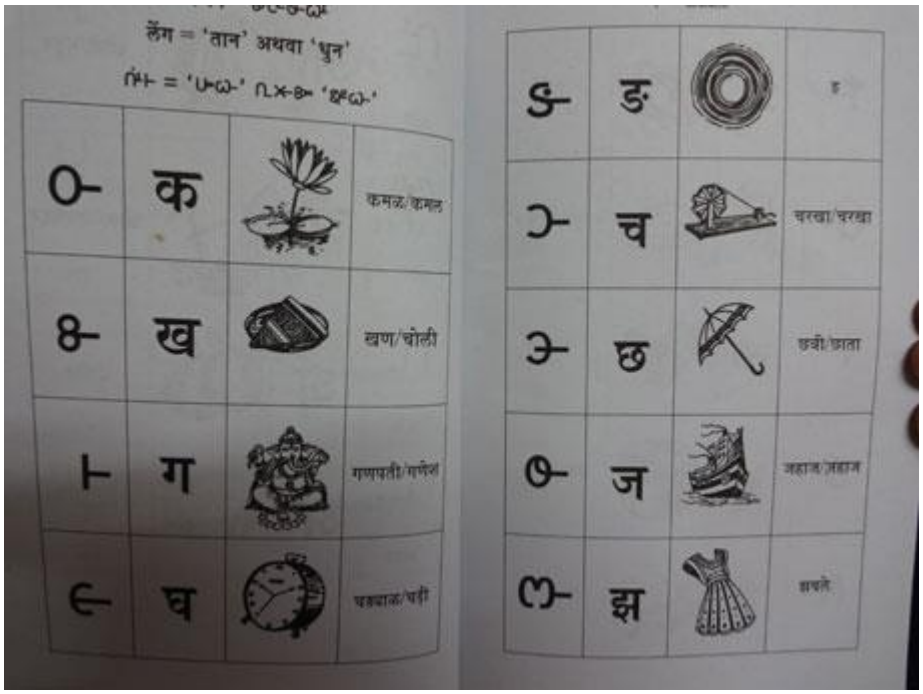
"Quite a few of the Scheduled languages in India cannot boast of this big a number of speakers," says Markam. "Yet government has not included this language in the schedule." Even the official figure of 2.7 million is higher than the number of speakers of languages like Dogri, Bodo and Manipuri, all of which have been included in the Schedule, rues Markam.

According to 2011 Census, Gonds, believed to belong to the Dravidian stock, have been notified as a scheduled tribe in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar,

Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal and West Bengal. The largest numbers are concentrated in the central part of India, known among tribal groups as Gondwana, which includes the Satpuda Plateau, a portion of the Nagpur plain area and the Narmada Valley.

"This vast geographical area should also be a big argument in favour of taking this language seriously," says Markam. "There are major concentrations of Gondi speakers in four states in the country, and they are spread across no less than 14 states."

This tribe comprises 13.45 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribes' population of India, and is the largest tribal group in the country.
Gondi language is spoken, for the most part, by the members of the Gond tribe, but census figures also include languages similar to Gondi, and spoken by tribes who live in the same areas as the Gonds, like Madia, Muria, Dorli and Ganda; these languages are deemed to be part of the Gondi group of languages. Gondi, as spoken today, is heavily influenced by the other local languages spoken in the respective states. For instance, the Gondi spoken in Andhra Pradesh is known colloquially as "Telugu Gondi" and that spoken in Maharashtra is known as "Marathi Gondi" because of the influence of these languages on the particular dialect of Gondi spoken in these areas. In the absence of standardisation, the variations in dialect make it difficult for Gondi speakers from different regions to communicate with one another.



The same is the condition of the Gondi script. This unique script, which is perhaps the only script in the country besides Urdu which is written right to left, also has three or four versions. Another unique quality of the script is that in the northern and central parts of India, it is the only language, barring Gujarati, which has a script of its own. All other north and central Indian languages use the Devnagri script.

However, due to government neglect, this script, too, is falling into disuse. In Karnataka, for instance, says K M Metry, head of the Department of Tribal Studies of Kannada University in Hampi, Karnataka, the Gondi spoken in the Bidar, Dawangere and Bengaluru districts of Karnataka by nomadic Rajgonds have come to be regarded as a dialect of Kannada, because the people have switched to using the Kannada script. "The spoken language is actually very different from Kannada, but because of the script it is mistaken for a Kannada dialect," says he.

In recent years, efforts have been made to revive the language of the largest tribal group of India. Efforts at popularising the script and the spoken language are being made since a decade or so, leading to some educated Gonds getting sufficient grasp of it to be able to write letters. Books on Gondi alphabet, grammar and usage have appeared, and a few dictionaries have also been compiled. However, none of these is comprehensive, since most efforts are localised and without supported. Recently, CGNet Swara, India's first

community radio on mobile phone, organised a workshop to start the process of standardisation. But all this is just a beginning. Without active government support, a unique language connected with the aspirations of the largest forest-dwelling tribal group in India is unlikely to make much headway in resurrecting itself.

8. 'Mission Connect Paderu' to enhance quality life of tribals

Notwithstanding the smart city tag, the landscape of the Agency areas in Visakhapatnam district paints a picture of contrast. From lack of road connectivity to inaccessibility to healthcare, non-availability of potable water to absence of public transport and power supply, the tribal pockets often lag behind gaining access to basic amenities even today. Video Player is loading. VDO.AI A little over two months back when A Mallikarjuna took charge as District Collector of Visakhapatnam, he made sure to frequent Agency areas to get the real picture of the struggles faced by the tribals.

However, the ground realities moved the Collector for apparent reasons. As a part of the first step to resolve the issues faced by the tribals, Mallikarjuna rolled

out 'Mission Connect Paderu', making way for a roadmap of a long-term development strategy. In a move to bring down the burden of people who continue to carry 'doli' (a makeshift stretcher) to help cater to the emergency needs of the tribals, provide improved drinking water facility and facilitate motorable roads, the endeavour aims to better infrastructure in the Agency areas. "Even if it is not a black top road, the intention is to facilitate a motorable road for the tribals to access. Making the industries as partners through corporate social responsibility initiatives, the idea is to enhance the existing infrastructure of the tribal region in the next three years," shares Mallikarjuna with The Hans India.

Though the state government is keen on strengthening the healthcare sector in rural regions, absence of approach roads turn out to be a bigger disadvantage to those residing in nondescript hamlets of Agency areas. Through the mission, the district machinery intends to bring down child mortality rate and maternal mortality rate as well. Even if the transformation is not possible overnight, the District Collector exudes confidence that brighter days are ahead for the tribal people in the days to come.

9.Chhattisgarh tribal protesters to head home

The protesters marched from Ambikapur district to reach Raipur on Wednesday, covering over 300 kms in ten days, to register their protest against what they called “illegal” land acquisition.

MEMBERS FROM tribal communities of 30 villages in Chhattisgarh's Sarguja and Korba districts, who have been **protesting against coal mining projects in Hasdeo Aranya region**, have decided to return to their villages after a meeting with state Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel Thursday evening. They also met Governor Anusuia Uikey earlier in the day.

The protesters marched from Ambikapur district to reach Raipur on Wednesday, covering over 300 kms in ten days, to register their protest against what they called "illegal" land acquisition.

State health minister TS Singh Deo met them the same day and issued a statement of support. The Chief Minister has assured them that an investigation will be carried out on the basis of their allegations. "We are standing with the aadiwasi of the state. The area of Lemru Elephant Reserve which covers all the coal blocks in the region will not be reduced than 1995 sq km as was decided by the government in 2018," a state government statement said.

"We were assured by the Governor that she would communicate with both the central and state governments," Alok Shukla, one of the protesters and convenor of Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan, said.They submitted their memorandum of demands to both the offices. "We are planning to go back…It's a crucial time for farming. Further course of action will be decided in a meeting later," one of the protesters said.

10. Arunachal: Govt signs MoUs with NGOs to run Eklavya Model Schools

MoUs have been signed between Arunachal Pradesh government and NGOs to run three Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) in the state.

Itanagar: Underlining the importance of quality education, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Saturday called upon the state's education department to focus on restructuring the functioning of government schools.

"The teachers of government schools are highly paid compared to those teaching in NGO-run ones, but the difference in the quality of education between these schools is stark. We are producing certificate holders but not people with real knowledge," Khandu said while reiterating his concern for the poor quality of education in government-run schools.

The chief minister was addressing an event that followed the signing of MoUs between the Arunachal Pradesh government and NGOs to run three Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) in the state.

CONTINUE READING BELOW

These three new schools at Nyapin in Kurung Kumey district, Khela in Tirap and at Tirbin in Leparada district would start functioning from the next academic session.

The MoUs were signed between the Arunachal Pradesh Eklavya Model Residential School Society (APEMRSS) and NGOs – Gyamar Art and Cultural Society to run the Nyapin School, Arunachal Shiksha Vikas Samiti to run the Khela School and VKV Arunachal Trust to run the EMRS at Tirbin.

Appreciating the NGOs for coming forward to run the schools, Khandu said it is tough to run residential schools, especially for the government, therefore it is much appreciated that experienced NGOs volunteer to run such schools to provide quality education to rural children.

EMRS is an initiative of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, along with the state government through the department of Social Justice & Empowerment and Tribal Affairs to ensure all tribal students get access to quality education in remote tribal areas. It is a premium co-educational institute for classes from 6 to 12.

Khandu said the EMRS model has been a successful one across the country in areas populated by tribals but regretted that in all these years Arunachal Pradesh could establish only two such schools – one at Bana in East Kameng, which is run by VKV Trust, and the other at Lumla in Tawang run by Art of Living.

The chief minister also suggested that wherever possible and feasible, old or defunct government schools needed to be converged with schemes like EMRS and handed over to reputed NGOs to run.

We are late but not too late to avail the benefits of the scheme. With the three schools beginning from this session, we will have five EMRS running. Five more are coming up in a few more districts, which are in different stages of establishment," he said.

Khandu informed that two EMRS – one at Medo in Lohit and the other at Dambuk in Lower Dibang Valley – are under construction and will be ready by March 2022, while the process for land identification and acquisition are on for the establishment of EMRS at Aalo (West Siang), Seppa (East Kameng) and Itanagar (Papum Pare).

Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs provides 100% of funds for the establishment of EMRS. As per the new pattern of funding, Rs 24 crore will be released for the construction of each EMRS. However, suitable and sufficient land (15 acres minimum) will have to be provided by the state government free of cost.

The MoU signing ceremony was also attended by SJETA minister Alo Libang, advisor to Libang and Hayuliang MLA Dasanglu Pul and education commissioner Niharika Rai.

11. Neanderthals and Homo sapiens used identical Nubian technology

Summary:

New analysis of a fossil tooth and stone tools from Shukbah Cave reveals Neanderthals used stone tool technologies thought to have been unique to modern humans.

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

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

In a new study published in *Scientific Reports*, researchers from the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History teamed up with international partners to re-examine the fossil and archaeological record of Shukbah Cave. Their findings extend the southernmost known range of Neanderthals and suggest that our now-extinct relatives made use of a technology previously argued to be a trademark of modern humans. This study marks the first time the lone human tooth from the site has been studied in detail, in combination with a major comparative study examining the stone tool assemblage.

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

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

"Professor Garrod immediately saw how distinctive this tooth was. We've examined the size, shape and both the external and internal 3D structure of the tooth, and compared that to Holocene and Pleistocene Homo sapiens and Neanderthal specimens. This has enabled us to clearly characterise the tooth as belonging to an approximately 9 year old Neanderthal child," says Dr. Clément

Zanolli, from Université de Bordeaux. "Shukbah marks the southernmost extent of the Neanderthal range known to date," adds Zanolli.

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

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

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

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

12. Tribal Health Collaborative 'Anamaya': A Multi Stakeholder Initiative to enhance Tribal Health and Nutrition launched

Anamaya, the Tribal Health Collaborative was launched by Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare Dr Harsh Vardhan and Union Minister of Tribal Affairs Shri Arjun Munda at a function in New Delhi today. The Collaborative is a multi-stakeholder initiative of Tribal Affairs Ministry supported by Piramal Foundation and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).It will converge efforts of various Government agencies and organisations to enhance the health and nutrition status of the tribal communities of India.

Also present at the occasion were Dr Vinod K Paul, Member Health, NITI Aayog, Mr. R Subrahmanyam Secretary, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Dr Navaljit Kapoor, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Mr Hari Menon, Director, BMGF, Mr Aditya Natraj, Head, Piramal Foundation, Mr Gaurav Arya, Country Director CIFF and Dr Shailendra Hegde, Senior VP, Piramal Swasthya.

This Collaborative is a unique initiative bringing together governments, philanthropists, national and international foundations, NGOs/CBOs to end all preventable deaths among the tribal communities of India. It aims to build a sustainable, high-performing health eco-system to address the key health challenges faced by the tribal population of India. It will begin its operations with 50 tribal, Aspirational Districts (with more than 20% ST population) across 6 high tribal population states. Over a 10-year period, the work of the THC will be extended to 177 tribal Districts as recognised by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

Speaking on the occasion, Sh Arjun Munda stated, "The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has been working relentlessly to address the health challenges of the tribal communities, engaging with State Governments and civil society

organisations. The Ministry has created a roadmap to address tribal health issues through the Tribal Health Action Plan. We are addressing issues related to tribal health on a Mission Mode and I welcome all the non-government organisations who have come togetherand shown their interest for this unique initiative. I am particularly thankful to Dr Harsh Vardhan and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for their support and I look forward to jointly reaching our common vision of enriching the lives of the tribal communities."

Dr Harsh Vardhan lauded the efforts of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, saying "The launch of the Tribal Health Collaborative is like a dream from me. Health is an area where every Ministry can contribute. We all know that the tribal areas are our real deprived areas. Not just primary healthcare but through our various schemes we are trying to provide secondary and tertiary healthcare to the most marginalized people. My only appeal to this Collaborative is that, in addition to all the other mentioned areas, please focus on TB so that we can reach our goal of aTB Free India"

In a video message, Smt. Smriti Z. Irani, Union Minister foe Women and Child development said, "The tribal people of our country are facing challenges of health and nutrition. The collaboration between Government and Non-Government agencies to address this challenge is a very welcome decision".

Dr Vinod Paul emphasised upon the need for community involvement and community engagement to make the tribal health plan a success.

Shri R Subrahmanyam Secretary, Ministry of Tribal Affairs in his address said, "A 'Tribal Health Cell' is being set up in Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Health care facilities in tribal areas are very scarce and the health standards of tribals are below normal level. All welfare measures should reach up to grass root level."

Addressing the need for a collaborative approach to reach the most marginalised and vulnerable communities, Mr. Ajay Piramal, Chairman, Piramal Enterprises stated "On behalf of the partners of the Tribal Health Collaborative, I am delighted to contribute to enhancing the health and nutrition status of the most vulnerable population of India. It has taken over a year to bring together organisations with diverse experiences and expertise, aligning them towards the common cause of tribal health enhancement. We look forward to working under the guidance of both the Ministries."

A compendium on Tribal Health was also released on the occasion.

13. Motivating, helping out PVTG children to take up education by Project Akansha

Under Project Akansha, over 220 students are enrolled in seven residential schools across Jharkhand.

RANCHI: Children of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) in Jharkhand, which are considered extremely backward but are on the verge of extinction, have started going to schools and doing well in exams

All thanks to Project Akasha, an initiative by Tata Steel Foundation which has been motivating and helping out PVTG children to take up education so that they can motivate others in the tribe and develop interest towards education.

Scattered throughout Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal, the Birhors are traditionally nomadic by nature, which spend their entire lives in the jungles sustaining on natural resources collected from forests. With less than 10,000 members left in the tribe, their vulnerability as an age-old ethnic group of India comes across in dwindling numbers.

The project has not only enabled quality education by enrolling Birhor and Sabar children into residential schools and supporting them with tuition fees, but has gone ahead and produced many first-generation learners in their families. It has not only given the children a chance at sound education, but also enabled them to imagine living in the reverie of becoming a doctor, or an engineer someday.

Therefore, with over 220 students enrolled in seven residential schools across Jharkhand, Project Aakansha is a strong foray into the dark shroud of illiteracy that surrounds the Birhors and Sabars, yet another nomadic tribe that is dependent on the forests for sustenance.

This year, as many as nine students enrolled in the project completed their matriculation with flying colours.

Stifan Birhor is one among them, who, for the first time felt the taste of success. Belonging to the Birhor tribe, Stifan is one of those many children from Jharkhand who have found their roots in a sound educational environment.

"It was my first exam in a new school and after scoring decent marks in almost all the subjects, the teacher called me to the front of the class and cheered me on!", says Stifan Birhor, a student of M S Mahato High School, who recently passed matriculation with a whopping 84.6 per cent. Possibly, this was the first time he was cheered for doing well in exams which will motivate him to study harder for
the next exam, he added.

Notably, with a smile beaming across the entire length of his face, there was a prominent presence of pride and excitement in Stifan's words.

Another child, Charan Birhor, who also studies in the same school under Project Akasha and scored 72 per cent in class 10 Board Examination, admitted that he would never like to go back to his old lifestyle.

"Initially, I used to spend the entire day roaming around the village with my friends, wasting all my time, but after getting enrolled in the school, I found myself being busy with studies and once I scored well in my exams, there was no looking back at the old lifestyle", says Charan Birhor.

Project Aakansha, therefore, aims at bringing a paradigm shift in the lives of Birhors and Sabars one child at a time.

"Education being the driving force towards creating a world that needs holistic development of children, Project Akansha aims at motivating students from communities to take up complete basic and gradually enable them chose their career paths," said Tata Steel Corporate Social Responsibility Chief, Sourav Roy.

Many of the students who are a part of the project Aakansha, the first generation learners, have become inspiration for many around them, he added.

Roy further added that it enables them to study sincerely and break out from the shackles of abject poverty and rural hardships that today envelops the members of the Birhor tribe.

14. Komaram Bheem: A forgotten Adivasi leader who gave the slogan 'Jal Jangal Jameen'

It is not very often that one hears name of *Komaram Bheem* in the line of great Adivasi/tribal leaders of the country. Though, he has been no less of a martyr in Adivasi atruggle for autonomy, his recognition has been mostly limited within the boundaries of Telangana/Andhra Pradesh. His history is erased from history texts, just like many Adivasi histories. Apart from it, very few know that *'Jal Jangal Jameen'* the popular slogan of Adivasi movements, was first given by Komaram Bheem. In his movement against Nizams, he argued that complete rights on all the resources of forest should be given to Adivasis.

Komaram Bheem belonged to Gond (*Koitur*) community, and was born in Sankepalli of Adilabad district, Telangana (in 1900). Adilabad district is located in north Telangana, making border with the state of Maharashtra. The region was predominantly populated by Gonds, and was under sovereignty of Gond

Kingdom of Chanda (Chandrapur) and Ballalpur. Bheem's childhood was spent without any exposure to the outside world, he did not have any formal education, and he grew up seeing and experiencing the plights of his people. As Mypathi Arun Kumar in his book narrates, "Bheem grew up listening to stories of exploitaion of Gond and Kolam Adivasis by *Janglaat* Police, businessmen, and zamindars. In order to survive, Bheem kept moving from one place to other trying to protect himself from exploitation of businessmen and extortion of officials. Crops produced after Podu farming, were taken away by Nizam officials, *Janglaats* arguing that the land was theirs. They'd cut fingers of Adivasi children, acussing them of illegaly cutting down trees. Tax were collected forcefully, otherwise false cases were registered. After being left with nothing in hand from farming, people had started moving out of their villages. In such situation, his father was killed by forest officials for asserting Adivasis' rights. Bheem was agitated by murder of his father and after father's death, his family moved from Sankepalli to Sardapur."

In October month of 1940, one day patwari Laxman Rao, Nizam pattadar Siddique saab came along with 10 people and started abusing and harassing Gonds to pay the taxes, at the time of harvesting. Gonds resisted and in this tussle Siddique saab died in the hands of Komaram Bheem. He ran away after the incident with his friend Kondal from Sartapur to Chanda (Chandrapur) by walk. One printing press owner named Vitoba helped and took them along with him from railway station. Vitoba was running a magazine against English and Nizam at that time. Bheem learnt English, Hindi, Urdu during his stay with Vitoba. After a while, Vitoba was arrested by Police and press was shut down. From there, Bheem went to Assam to work in tea planatation with a person he met at Manchiryal railway station. He worked there for four and half years, where he also protested against planatation owners for the rights of workers in tea plantation and was also arrested during this struggle. After four days, Bheem managed to espaced from jail. From Assam railway station, he got into a goods train and reached Ballarshah. While he was in Assam, he had heard about Alluri Sitaramraju, who was leading the Adivasi struggles in forest. He remembered struggles of Ramji Gond who had faught against Nizams' atrocities. After returning he started planning and organizing future struggle of Adivasis."

The present Telangana state was once part of Nizams rule of Hyderabad state. It was ruled by Nawabs of Asifjahi dynasty which was later included into Indian Union in 1948. During Nizam's time unbearable taxes were imposed and exploitation and atrocities of local zamindars were rampant on Adivasi masses. In the background of ongoing atrocities, Bheem launched massive agitations

against Nizam government, and started guerrilla warfare against their army. Making Jode Ghat the centre of his activities, Bheem continued his guerrilla war from 1928 to 1940.

"After return, he moved to Kakanghat with his mother and brother Somu. He worked for Lacchu Patel, who was head of Devadam village. Lacchu also took care of Bheem's marriage with Som Bai. Bheem helped Lacchu settle his land litigation with Asifabad Ameensaab. This incident made him popular in surrounding villages. After some time Bheem went with his family members to Bhabejhari and cleared the land for cultivation. Patwari Janglaat chowkidars again came at the time of harvesting, they harassed and threatened them to leave the place, arguing it's their (Nizam government) land. Bheem has decided to meet Nizam to discuss the atrocities on Adivasis and demand justice, but he could not get the appointment to meet Nawab. He returned to Jodeghat without losing hope, and realized that revolution against the rule was only solution left to their problems. He mobilised Adivasi youth and common people from twelve Gondu Kolam Gudems – Jodeghat, Patnapur, Bhabejhari, Tokennavada, Chalbaridi, Shivaguda, Bhimangundi, Kallegaon, Ankusapur, Narsapur, Koshaguda, Linepatter; and formed a guerilla army with them to protest for the land rights. He proposed a plan to declare themselves as indipendent Gond kingdom. (Bheem's demand for a separate Gond state was the first in the series of demands for autonomous Gondwana state for Gonds).

With the sound of *Tudum, Ragal* was hoisted for initiating the movement. Gond's revolt started by attacking Babejhari and Jodeghat landlords. Nizam government was frightened after getting to know about this uprising and sent Asifabad collector to negotiate with Komaram Bheem and assured that they will be given land *pattas* and additional land will be given to Komaram Bheem himself to rule. But Bheem denied their proposal and argued that his struggle is for justice and Nizam has to release those people who have been arrested on false charges, at the same time leave their (Gond regions) place and asserted his demand for self-rule.

War had begun with the sounds of *Tudum* and *Tuta*. Gond Adivasis with utmost passion and ethusiasm, protected their land. Bheem's speech encouraged them to participate in the struggle for land, food and freedom. People have decided to fight until their last breath for protecting their future. During this time, Bheem raised slogan of – "Jal Jangal Zameen". Nizam *sarkar* did not listen to the demands of Bheem and Gond's oppression continued, while Nizam *sarkar* started consipiring to kill Bheem. Tahsildar Abdul Sattar led this

cruel conspiracy and sent Captain Aliraja Brands along with 300 army men to Babhejhari and Jodeghat hills. Nizam sarkar failed to capture him and his army. So they bribed Kurdu Patel (from Gond community), who became informant for Nizam sarkar and provided information about Bheem's army.

Based on this information, on September 1, 1940 early in the morning, "women in Jodeghat had spotted armed policemen surrounding their village as they came looking for Komaram Bheem. It was three years since Bheem had been leading a rebellion on the question of rights of tribal people to pastures and the lands being tilled by them in the forests. Bheem, who was camping at Jodeghat with a handful of his warriors, were instantly up and got ready by arming themselves. Most of the rebels could manage to get hold of axes, sickles and bamboo sticks. Asifabad Talukdar Abdul Sattar, a personification of the Nizams' tyranny tried to get Bheem to surrender through emissaries. After refusal for the third time by Bheem to submit himself, Sattar ordered to open fire . The tribal rebels could do nothing but went down fighting. "As many as 15 warriors besides Bheem attained martyrdom. The incident plunged the tribals into gloom on that full moon day," the late Maru master and Bhadu master, the close aides of Bheem, used to say whenever they wound up their narrative of the incident. Not many, however, got to see the martyrs as the bodies were burnt unceremoniously." That was a full moon night, when hundreds of his followers armed themselves with bows, arrows, and spears and launched assault against the police. Bheem and his followers fought with bravery and lost his life in the battlefield after suffering fatal injuries."

Assuming that Bheem knew the tradtional spells, they feared he could come back to life. Therefore they shot him until his body became like a seive and unrecognization. They burned his body at the instant and left only when they were assured that he is no more. A gond star has fallen on that day of *Ashauja Porunima*. The place that echoed with the sounds of Tudum, wept in the Jodenghat hills. All Gond villages cried and the place drowend in sorrow. The entire forest was resounded with slogans like Komaram Bheem amar rahe, bheem dada amar hai."

Many existing historical accounts about Komaram Bheem claim that Komaram Bheem was a nationalist '*vanvasi*' (hindu) leader who fought against the Nizam government. These narratives argue that Bheem's resentment against Nizam was because of 'Islamic' oppression on Hindus and destruction of Hindu culture. When, Gond Adivasis are not even Hindus, how does Bheem become a Hindu icon leading the battle against 'islamist' oppression? Which part of Bheem's

history suggests that he endorsed to 'Hindu' religion or fought for Hindu rights? Gond people's history provides us an entirely different story. It suggests that these claims are mere propaganda to associate Bheem into Hindu nationalist discourse by manipulating history. Bheem's movement against Nizam was solely born out of 'denial of basic Adivasi rights over land, recourses and demand for autonomy'. In his people's imagination, he was only seeking to liberate his people from *dikus (outsiders)* and was fighting for justice and self-rule.

In the light of decades long Adivasis struggle for *patta* rights, Komaram Bheem's contributions remains significant – He exemplifies a revolutionary icon for all Adivasi movements and also reminds us of the forgotten promises of nation and state towards the Adivasis. Komaram Bheem holds utmost respectful position among Gond Adivasi community and is considered as a deity (*pen*). Gonds observe Bheem's death anniversary every year on Aswayuja Powrnami and on this day, an event is organized at Jodeghat to commemorate his life and struggle. After long struggle, 72 years after his death, in 2012 Komaram Bheem's statue was installed at Tank Bund, Hyderabad. Komaram Bheem will forever remain as a leader and icon for age long Adivasi struggle of '*Jal Jangal Jameen*'

15. Nourishing The Tribal Food Systems

The tribal food system is dependent on dryland agriculture, forests, common property, water resources, and biodiversity, says Basanta Kumar Kar, recipient of the Global Nutrition Leadership Award

India's 10.5 crore tribal population from about 705 distinct Scheduled Tribes (STs) representing 8.6 per cent of the total population is hardest hit by the

menace of hunger, malnutrition, and pandemic. Estimates show that about 40 per cent of under-five tribal children in India are chronically malnourished (stunted). Chronic malnutrition impacts survival, growth, learning, performance in school and productivity as adults. More than half of preschoolers and more than one-third of school-age children and adolescents belonging to scheduled tribes were reportedly anaemic. Almost 85 per cent of children in the age group of 6-23 months do not receive a minimum acceptable diet that includes a minimum of four or more food groups. Reportedly, 40 per cent of women consume fried food, and 18 per cent consume aerated drinks. The prevalence of overweight and obesity is 10 per cent among scheduled tribe women which is unusual and alarming. This is of serious concern, indicating that the food system is failing to deliver and supply safe and nutritious diets.

Food systems aggregate the food value chain, nutrition, livelihoods and climate systems, range of actors that provide a right to life and a life to live with dignity. The tribal food system is dependent on dryland agriculture, forests, common property, water resources, and biodiversity. The tribals have been fighting for Jal (water), Jangal (forest) and Jameen (land). Agricultural and food policies have largely focused on increasing food production and mitigating hunger and energy inadequacy. The food subsidies on rice and wheat, urbanisation, globalisation and the consumption of highly refined and processed foods given the societal changes have impacted tribal food systems. In particular, traditional food systems in the tribal areas, the local diversity from plants and crops that are rich food sources of macro and micro-nutrients, notably the millets, wild edible foods, leafy vegetables, nuts, seeds and fruits are being largely eroded and losing their rightful place.

The diluted food systems have caused multiple burdens of malnutrition, namely, undernutrition, micronutrient malnutrition as well as overweight/obesity which are conditions favourable for emerging non -communicable diseases. Malnutrition is not only impairing the cognitive potential, demographic dividend, growth, and productivity but is also increasing the burden of the disease.

High levels of exclusions, poor sanitation, hygiene and lack of safe drinking water, worm infestation, co-infections, and diseases like malaria, lymphatic filariasis, sickle cell anaemia and tuberculosis exacerbate morbidity and mortality. The reported prevalence of mortality among children and women, starvation and chronic illness have been haunting for generations. It is perpetual.

The COVID -19 pandemic has aggravated the situation, with the tribal food systems being drastically affected.

To contain the spread of the infection, mitigate hunger and malnutrition, the Government has responded readily to various measures. The provisions under India's target-driven Poshan Abhiyaan, free food grains under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) along with the supplementary nutrition at the doorstep are benefitting all vulnerable populations. The 'One Nation – One Ration Card Scheme' allows people to access food entitlements from anywhere in India irrespective of the place where the ration card is registered. There is a growing interest in the promotion of Nutri-cereals and biofortified crops. Odisha Millet Mission and Andhra Pradesh Millets Board are significant steps towards nourishing the tribal food systems.

Reforms in the Food Systems

Investment in tribal food systems will supercharge demographic dividends. It calls for a leadership agenda of action. To increase the availability, accessibility, affordability, and consumption of safe and nutritious foods; the undernourished tribals need a caring, resilient, inclusive, nutrition-sensitive and sustainable food system. The suggested reforms are as follows:

1. Structural Reforms- A new legislation on food systems that can take care of a) sustainable food and nutrition, b) food safety and c) preserving biosafety and biodiversity is necessary for a dignified living and just and equitable governance. Effective implementation of the provisions under the Forest Rights Act- 2006, Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act and the NITI Aayog's Model Agricultural Land Leasing Act- 2016 will go a long way in increasing entitlements. There is a high incidence of physical violence and early marriage among tribal women. Investment in women's empowerment and rights and workable institutional arrangements will be key drivers in addressing exclusions and gender-based disparities. Special food systems strengthening measures for aboriginal extinctive primitive tribes is needed as they suffer from multiple marginalisations.

2. First and Second Windows of Opportunity- The food systems for tribals need to prioritise actions for the First 1000 Days of life- The First Window of Opportunity and adolescent girls-The Second Window of Opportunity. During the first 1000 days, through inter-personal counselling and home contacts by the grassroots functionaries, initiatives should be taken to promote appropriate

infant and young child feeding. Prevention and control of adolescent anaemia and improving reproductive health and life skills of adolescent girls will pave the way for a safe and healthy outcome in newborns.

3. Atmanirbhar POSHAN (Nutritional Self Reliance)- It is one of the critical policy measures on revitalising food systems. Each district must be self-sufficient in at least six food groups- this can bring food and nutritional self-sufficiency at the sub-national level. These food groups constitute cereals and millets, pulses, milk and milk products, roots and tubers, green leafy vegetables, other vegetables, fruits, sugar, fat/ oil and meat, fish, poultry, and eggs.

4. Integrated Strategy to Address Disease Burden- There must be an integrated strategy on addressing issues of malnutrition, lymphatic filariasis and malaria, childhood TB, sickle cell anaemia and HIV reduction. In this regard, India needs to establish a centre of excellence. In the endemic areas, screening of filaria and malaria need to be incorporated specifically in routine antenatal care, village health nutrition and sanitation days (VHNSD) and in the gram sabhas.

5. Addressing All Forms of Hunger- Addressing protein, calorie and hidden hunger, known as micronutrient malnutrition, would require investing in the tribal cultural endowments, traditional diets, dryland agriculture and crops with high nutrition (millets, pulses, wild edible foods among others) which were traditionally consumed by the tribals. It calls for expanding food programs and income safety nets, diversifying both production and farming system to include poultry, fishery, and dairy. Increasing dietary diversity, promoting food fortification and bio-fortification, and streamlining the existing supplementation programs would control hidden hunger. Working with India's Jal Jeevan Mission to increase access to safe water and making the water a source of nutrients would be a significant milestone.

6. Prevention and Control of Overweight and Obesity- It would require multiple strategies on addressing the local food system to improve access to safe and nutrient-dense foods and discourage the intake of high salt, sugar, and fat-rich foods. Food-based dietary guidelines need to be used as a tool in agriculture, food, and health planning to set targets in healthy food production and consumption. India's food regulating body FSSAI, Micro Small and Medium food Enterprises and Farmer's Cooperatives can play an enabling role in reducing the impending double burden on malnutrition.

7. Survive and Thrive-An Emergent Initiative- Survive and thrive of wasted and severely affected malnourished children is an emergent initiative. The children need a safe and dignified living. Each state needs to establish a Child Task Force. The rising wasting is a challenge during the pandemic. Revitalising home visits and inter-personal counselling following COVID norms, activating Nutrition Rehabilitation Centers (NRCs) and nutrition surveillance will be important measures during the pandemic.

8. Promoting and Protecting Livelihoods- Tribals need a sustained income that can address seasonality, perpetual poverty and increase affordability. Promotion of women smallholder farmer-led resilient nutrition-sensitive agriculture, nutrition entrepreneurs under "Stand Up India Scheme" and incentivising tribal micro-small and medium enterprises (MSMSEs) will be important measures. India's flagship Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme can be linked to Nutri-garden, watershed programs, diversifying production and farming system. Household-level non-farm enterprises may be encouraged through a cooperative system. Protecting income from conspicuous consumption and sustained savings would be a key determinant for sustainable livelihoods.

COVID-19 provides an opportunity for new world order. It is a critical wake-up call to redesign the food systems that promotes and protects biodiversity, delivers a nutritious and affordable diet for all. All the stakeholders need to come together to systematically solve the food and nutrition divide for sustainable food systems and the planet.

16. Tribal leader Diego Bastav Siddhi passes away

He fought for the welfare of the Siddhi community and rights of forest dwelling communities

Diego Bastav Siddhi, a leader of the Siddhi tribal community, died in Halyal in Uttara Kannada district on Friday. He was around 75.

He was instrumental in pushing forward the demand that the community in all districts should be treated equally as a member of the Scheduled Tribe. He organised the Siddhi community in Belagavi district where it was listed under backward classes. He was a part of the national Siddhi federation and led delegation to the central government about the welfare of the Siddhi community and rights of forest dwelling communities in the past.

The Siddi community gets its first lawmaker in Karnataka. They are included as the Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka.

Siddi Tribe

- The Siddi also known as Sidi, Siddhi, Sheedi or Habshi, are an ethnic group inhabiting India and Pakistan.
- They are sometimes referred to as Afro-Indians. They are descended from the Bantu peoples of the East African region.

- Similarly, another term for Siddis, habshi, is held to be derived from the common name for the captains of the Abyssinian ships that also first delivered Siddi slaves to the subcontinent.
- They are primarily Muslims, although some are Hindus and others belong to the Catholic Church.

How they came to India?

- The first Siddis are thought to have arrived in India in 628 AD at the Bharuch port. Several others followed with the first Arab conquest of the subcontinent in 712 AD.
- The latter groups are believed to have been soldiers with Muhammad bin Qasim's Arab army and were called Zanjis.
- In the Delhi Sultanate period prior to the rise of the Mughals in India, Jamal-ud-Din Yaqut was a prominent Siddi slave-turned-nobleman who was a close confidant of Razia Sultana.
- Siddis were also brought as slaves by the Deccan Sultanates. They also served in the Navy of Shivaji Maharaj.
- Several former slaves rose to high ranks in the military and administration, the most prominent of which was Malik Ambar.
- Later the Siddi population was added to via Bantu peoples from Southeast Africa that had been brought to the Indian subcontinent as slaves by the Portuguese.

17. Kharchi Puja, Synthesis Of Tribal And Hindu Culture, Begins In Tripura

All rituals were performed as usual but due to the Covid-19 restrictions unlike earlier years gathering of devotees were much less.

The annual festival of worship of Fourteen Gods popularly known as Kharchi Puja in Tripura started on Saturday.

Moreover, the annual fair is also not held this year.

Of the many festivals in the hilly northeast Indian state Tripura, the worship of Fourteen Gods popularly known as Kharchi Puja occupies the pride of the place.

Every year it is celebrated with overflowing enthusiasm in June-July. In fact, Tripura is also known as the land of Fourteen Gods.

During the reign of Maharaja Krishna Manikya with the change of his capital from Udaipur to Puran Haveli or Old Agartala the Fourteen Gods temple was also constructed there in 1760 AD, which is still there.

As a matter of fact this festival is associated with the indigenous tribal deities but influenced by the Brahmanical Hindus.

The peculiarity of this festival is that although the rituals are performed according to the Hindu rites but in the Hindu religion there is no such god whose body is absent, incomplete or only a particular portion is present yet in this festival only the heads of these deities are worshiped.

In fact the broken head image is not supported by the Brahmanical iconography as the object of ritual, however, these fourteen head images have been accepted as the popular deities by the Hindus in Tripura

Again like other Indo-Mongoloid tribes of North East India in Tripura also the majority Tripuri tribe had recognized only one Supernatural supreme power but with their coming under close influences of Hindu way of life.

However, Animism, the primitive form of religion is traceable in the tribal still today who had gradually become Hindu by religion.

The heads created out of an alloy of eight metals were placed at the Sunderbans in the confluence of river Ganga and the Bay of Bengal. They were later shifted from there to Khayerpur or Puran Haveli, 10 km from state capital Agartala after the construction of the Chaturdasa Devata temple.

In fact a dual arrangement is in vogue. Kharchi Puja though is a tribal festival but the deities worshiped are all of Hindu gods and goddesses and remarkably both tribal priest 'Chantai' as well as Hindu Brahmin perform the rituals together.

Another special feature of this festival is that these deities are kept locked in a room throughout the year and it is only during these seven days that they are exhibited to the devotees.

On the first day of the week-long festival the deities are brought out from a locked room where the deities are kept for one year.

First the state police plays India's National anthem to pays tribute to the deities then a procession led by the chief royal priest or the Raj Chantai and followed by other priests bearing bamboo umbrellas on their heads making a peculiar sound 'ehune' and thousands of devotees to the nearby river Howrah for bathing them.

After bath the procession returns to the temple premises where the deities are worshipped by the royal priest and then taken to a separate room surrounded by iron net so that the devotees can see them during these seven days.

In the past human sacrifices were offered to please the fourteen deities but now it is a tradition to sacrifice he-goats on the first day, which is still followed and now it is arranged by the state government.

However, throughout these seven days thousands of devotees offer sacrifices of he-goats, chickens, pigeons, etc.

The Chief Royal Priest, who still today according to the customs is given a state salute by the state police, as according to the ritual he shall be the king during these seven days of celebration.

In the royal days Kharchi Puja was celebrated within the premises of the palace, for peace and well-being of the kingdom but today with the abolition of the Monarchy, people from all walks of life, tribal and non-tribal celebrate this festival and its popularity is increasing day-by-day.

Visitors who came to witness this unique festival said that Tripura had its own communal conflict in the past between the tribal and non-tribal but now it's a very peaceful state and such a festival helps in restoring peace in this state but this year due to the restriction very few visitors are there.

Although Kharchi is essentially a tribal festival yet since it has begun the non-tribal also participate in this festival with equal enthusiasm. Devotees from all classes, both tribal and non-tribal and from every corner of Tripura come in thousands to this holy place thus setting a good example of national integration.

Today when the whole world is reeling under communal disharmony this festival is a silver lining and a bridge between the people of both tribal and non-tribal communities in Tripura to generate peace, faith, love and harmony.

18. Naga tribes of Myanmar face loss of land and forest under new law

- Myanmar hosts more than 100 ethnic groups with their own customary systems of land and forest management.
- Recent amendments to land law conflict with those systems, however, with critics warning that the new provisions may facilitate land grabbing and displacement of tribal communities.
- Tribal members say the changes to the law contradict the spirit of the peace process, which is to allow ethnic minorities greater autonomy than under the previous military dictatorship.

The Naga tribes inhabit the hills in the northwestern corner of Myanmar and northeast India. They had long been isolated from outside culture, dwelling in independent village republics. This protected them from the land grabs that have been so prevalent in the rest of Myanmar.

For centuries, tribes could sustain themselves by following their own customary tenure system, deciding who can use and manage different resources. Their traditional rules have guided them in the effective management of the properties that belong to separate or multiple households, clans, villages and whole tribes.

However, their rights and culture have been recently undermined by amendments to the Myanmar's Law on Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFV) Land. The essence of the dispute lies in the issue of shifting arable lands, called jhum or dengyo.

The law categorizes these lands as VFV and thus makes them particularly susceptible to expropriation. Another law, on farmlands, does not recognize this form of cultivation, leaving forest-based Naga tribes at peril of losing all claims to the lands and forests that they manage rotationally.

"We were not sure if we can retain access to the forest in the future," says Yo Ela, a tribesman from Somra, on the Myanmar-India border. "We had been cultivating the forest since generations but suddenly the government claimed rights to it. We were forced to revise our rules and cut the timber down for their projects."

The forests in Somra used to be a combination of hardwood and pine trees, with rice, vegetables, fruits and herbs sown on the hillsides. The NGO Resource Rights for the Indigenous Peoples (RRtIP) notes that the arrival of the forest department, with its land management system, undermines the sustainable forest management that the tribes practice in accordance with their customary system.

In another corner of Myanmar's Sagaing Division, villagers from Aung Mye near Khamti town are working to clean a local river polluted by extractive industries.

"Our tribal leader was ineffective in mediating with the company," said Lajau from Haimi subtribe in an interview. "We have sent five elders to them and filed a complaint to the local government to find solution for the lack of drinking water." The company has built a diesel-powered water pump, but villagers say that they cannot afford the cost to operate it.

The loss of access to resources including rivers, lands and forests has a history of leading to dire consequences. Myanmar's previous long-lived military regime treated community properties as being at its own disposal. After the country's transition to a semi-democracy in 2015, there was hope for change, both among the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities. Among the reforms, the persecution of minorities for their Christian beliefs in this Buddhist-majority country ended, as did their exploitation for army projects.

"In the past, we couldn't object to the army order; otherwise we would be killed on the spot," says Din Pe, a member of the Dan Gon subtribe, in an interview.

One of the hopes for peacebuilding in Myanmar was the creation of a federal state with decentralized powers to manage land and natural resources. Such a

system would help distribute the benefits between the national, state and local government levels.

However, today, in pursuit of investment reforms, decision-makers based in the capital Naypyidaw have created a new set of rules for the management of land and forest hundreds of miles away, threatening to derail all the reconciliation efforts. At first, lawmakers renamed community land and resources as virgin, fallow and vacant land. They then set a requirement of obtaining official permission for the occupation of land. In addition, they removed provisions on security of tenure over traditional tenure arrangements.

Policy advisers from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) say most of the customary property of the Naga tribes can be categorized as VFV; hence, they warn the VFV law may lead to unfair appropriation of tribal property. Civil rights groups say that lack of recognition of pre-existing rights or claims violates several international norms and conventions. Land in Our Hands (LIOH), the Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability (MATA) as well as 41 civil society organizations have called for the withdrawal of the law.

The Myanmar government created a central committee to manage VFV land, known as the CCVFV. Official statistics show that about 30% of all the country's land can be categorized as VFV land, which means it can be reallocated for private investment at any time.

Under the VFV law, the committee can reallocate this land to domestic and overseas investors for up to 70 years. The number of permits granted for VFV land is increasing every year, according to the Myanmar Investment Commission.

The policies made in the country's capital do not resonate with many tribal people.

"The new VFV law, imposed by the central government, was not even consulted with us," said John Para, a tribal member from Leishi township, in an interview. In reality, most Naga farmers are likely unaware of the obligations introduced by these provisions. Their territories are relatively remote from the rest of the country.

"All Naga lands and forests have owners," John Para said in an interview. "No one can sell the land to the outsiders. We have clear rules for transferring land rights to protect against landlessness and accumulation."

A 2018 report by RRtIP notes long tradition of forest management has allowed the Naga people to maintain water sources and obtain supplies of food, medicine, construction materials and firewood. Because they live off the forests, they are invested in planting valuable trees with a combination of refined seeding, dispersing and tree felling. Working collectively, families sustain pine woodlots in a rotational system.

In addition, tribal households and villages grow subsistence and cash crops in a comprehensive system that encourages agriculture innovation. The effectiveness of the land management system is derived from the rules determining the decision-making process and rule enforcement. As confirmed by USAID Land Tenure Project, Transnational Institute and the RRtIP report, this sustainability cannot exist without customary tenure, village institutions and the tribal justice system.

Scientists studying the impact of shifting cultivation across the tropics have similarly found that tenure systems are vital in resource management. Notably, communities use these systems as responsive tools to make changes to their surroundings.

However, because of disagreements within the scientific community over this form of farming, mainly due to alleged soil erosion and permanent loss of forest cover, Myanmar's government requested that the FAO analyze its impact.

"Our jhum cultivation is not harmful to the environment," Para said when asked about its negative impacts. "We live thanks to the forest; if we mismanaged it, we couldn't survive until now."

As reported by RRtIP, in January and February all men and women work cooperatively to clear and cultivate fields. After at least three dry weeks, each village clears the fields using controlled burning, a practice aimed at stimulating the germination of some beneficial forest trees. It releases soil minerals and decreases acidity, thereby strengthening seedling vitality. At the same time, it eradicates weeds, soil pathogens and insect pests. The crops are cultivated on the cleared fields for one or two years. Afterward, the land is left to naturally regenerate.

The soil gets revitalized throughout this fallow period, similar to the natural organic cycle of the environment. The longer the duration of the fallow period,

the better the quality of the regenerated soil. The process also increases the biodiversity of native species.

The Naga sell their agricultural products mostly locally. They also raise chickens and pigs, and hunt for wild animals for an additional source of meat. “The successful hunter needs to show respect to the forest and to the whole community,” says Lajau, an elderly resident from Aung Mye, near Khamti, in an interview. “That is why they can keep the animal’s head for themselves, and share the rest of the meat with other villagers.”

Keeping this tradition alive can be seen as a backbone of the inter-tribal system of resolving conflicts over land.

“We have never needed to revert to the outside courts or offices to settle our internal Naga issues,” said Le Sui Thwa, a member of the Para subtribe, in an interview. He says that thanks to this customary system, they can arbitrate all disputes that arise between the members.

Following the creation of the Naga Self-Administrated Zone, the cease-fire was signed to end decades of conflict between tribal insurgent groups and the government. But many here see the arrangement as advantaging the government over the tribes.

“I feel like a guest on my own land,” said Jan Khine, a member of the Makury subtribe, in an interview. “The officials want to govern us by their own rules.”

Competition over land and resources has driven dozens of conflicts across Myanmar. In many cases, those disputes are compounded by issues of identity, citizenship, and right to self-determination.

Historically, the Naga tribes established self-sufficient villages high up in the Naga Hills. They were well-known for ritual headhunting and face tattooing, but gradually abandoned these practices as they embraced Christianity, in some instances as late as the second half of the 20th century.

The role of traditional beliefs has been diminished; nevertheless, their relationship to the land should be interpreted through their indigenous culture. Deeply rooted to the land, their ceremonies are linked to jhum cultivation under traditional land management.

Apantsi Pamri, a member of the Long Phuri Naga community, says that in addition to their cultural bonds, providing the tribes with secure legal titles would help them to operate in a way that would both protect existing land and improve yields.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) says the Myanmar government needs to acknowledge the value of the customary tenure system. The incompatibility of state laws makes customary rights over the lands and forests of the Naga people more vulnerable than ever, threatening their livelihood, environment and culture.

All the Naga people interviewed for this story say they want to see the development, not the annihilation, of their culture. They stress that their indigenous knowledge supports ecological resilience by contributing to social security and cultural integrity. For these reasons, international entities such as the FAO remind that the Myanmar's government should take all possible steps to support the sustainability of the forest-dependent people and beyond.