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The Gond Will Bury, Not Cremate, Their Dead To Save Trees



For the Gond community, one of India's largest indigenous people, cremation is a part of the final rites when someone dies – the dead body is put atop a pile of wood and burnt to ash. But realising that they were faced with a choice between holding on to an ancient ritual and protecting their environment, which they consider sacred, the Gond people of Chhattisgarh have decided to bury their dead instead of cremating them, to save trees.

“We [Gonds] have an integral relationship with nature and every feature of the forest has a spiritual significance for us. So, we have decided to save nature in every form and save trees for mankind. We are not going to put bodies on a massive pile of wood allowing the insatiable fire churning out ash,” Siddh Ram Meravi, a Gond tribal and general secretary of Jila Gond Sewa Samiti of Kabirdham district in India's eastern state Chhattisgarh, told Mongabay-India.

“The practice of cutting trees using them for making pyres can be stopped if we bury the dead instead of cremating them. Hence the community decided to include burying in our constitution,” Meravi said, referring to the collective decision taken during the two-day community conference, Gond mahasammelan, held on March 6-7 in Kabirdham district. The event was attended by more than 2000 delegates.

Gond tribes depend on the forest for survival. The forest and its trees provide shelter, medicines, water, food and fuel, notes the study – *Livelihood sources of Gond Tribes: A study of village Mangalnaar, Bhairamgarh block, Chhattisgarh* conducted by Srabani Sanyal, Associate Professor at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi and Ramyash, assistant professor at Government Naveen College Bhairamgarh, Chhattisgarh.

The Gonds are mentioned in the epic Ramayana, and four of their kingdoms are dated between 1300 and 1600 AD. With more than 12 million Gonds in the country,

the major concentration of the ethnic group is in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Telangana and Jharkhand.

Notably, many of these states have reported a drop in their carbon stock over the past two years, says a detailed analysis of the Indian State of Forest Report 2019.

Tradition of 'Mitti sanskaar'

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Tradition of 'Mitti sanskaar'

“The decision to bury our dear ones instead of cremating them is welcomed by the Gonds,” said Chait Ram Raj Dhurvey, a member of the tribal community, as he

walked out from the Chuyya forest range in Kabirdham district, with a large crop of grass in one hand and a dried bottle gourd which he uses as a vessel for water.

The Chuyya and neighbouring Banamhaida and Chingldai forest range near his village are rich in biodiversity and home to leopards, wild boar and sloth bears.

A resident of Buchipara, Dhurvey, talks about efforts to revive their age-old Mitti Sanskaar (burial) tradition. Mitti Sanskaar was common practice earlier, among the Gonds. It is believed in the community that through this ritual, the body mixes with five basic elements of nature: earth, air, water, fire and space.

There are several references in ancient Sanskrit, texts about cremation as an ancient ritual in Hinduism. However, it is not known when Gonds started following the tradition of cremation.

Some members of the tribal group believe that the Hindu ritual of cremation was adopted by the group during the medieval period when Gond kingdoms had assimilated several religious and cultural influences living alongside Hindu communities.

The environmental cost

While life has changed over the past century or so, the traditional Hindu funeral pyre where the fire burns for hours, churning out ashes is still very common.

According to estimates, funeral pyres consume 60 million trees annually, producing 8 million tonnes of carbon dioxide or greenhouse gas emissions and 500,000 tonnes of ash which is later thrown into rivers.

Over the years, several governments and environmental groups have also promoted the use of electric systems as an alternate way of cremation.

Mokshda, a Delhi-based NGO working to reduce the environmental impact of funeral pyres, describes its creation of an alternate energy efficient "green cremation system" by maintaining that a body can burn completely in lesser time and with lesser wood than usual.

"A traditional pyre takes six hours and requires 500-600 kilograms of wood to burn a body completely, while the benefit of our alternate system is that it takes up to two hours and 150-200 kilograms of wood to burn a body," explains Anshul Garg, executive officer of Mokshda said.

Not only the cost of fuel is reduced, but even the emissions are also cut by up to 60%, he added. Mokshda's green cremation system consists of a human-sized grate beneath a roof and a chimney which reduces heat loss. Here the wood is placed on the metal slats, which enables better air circulation around the flames.

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