**ANTHROPOLOGY CURRENT AFFAIRS MAGAZINE APRIL 2022**

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# CURRENT AFFAIRS ANTHROPOLOGY

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# PHYSICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

## 1. ANCIENT BONES TELL A SWINGING STORY ABOUT OUR TREE CLIMBING ANCESTORS — STUDY

Humans may associate scaling branches with childish behavior — classic monkeying around — but in truth, climbing trees is a big part of our collective story. Ancient bones unearthed in Africa go a long way in telling the tale. Millions of years after hominins began walking on two legs, some early human species were still hanging out in trees, according to a new analysis of fossilized femur bones discovered in South Africa's Sterkfontein Caves. Scans of two leg bones, both of which seem to both be from bipedal hominins, show that one of the species actually spent much of its time climbing trees, not walking on the ground.

Evidence of early human species walking on two legs dates back 6 million years. At a glance, the bones in the new study — each about 2 million years old — seem to align with a primarily bipedal way of moving. But using CT scans and comparing the femurs to modern human and great ape bones, researchers have peered below the surface for the first time, revealing that the bones, while similar, were used in very different ways.

The study was published Monday in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. OLD BONES, NEW TALES — One of the femurs came from the hominin Australopithecus africanus, the same species as Lucy. This early human had a mix of human- and ape-like traits, but it seems they were quite happy on their feet. The CT scans reveal that the way the hip bone was used to carry weight aligns with two-legged walking, based on the density of the head of the femur. The other bone tells a different story, however.

Researchers are not sure which ancient human species it belonged to, but the likeliest culprits are either an individual in the Homo genus, or the hominin Paranthropus robustus. Whatever early human relative the bone in question belonged to, they weren't doing too much walking on the ground, it seems. The scans show a different pattern in its bone density, indicating it was more frequently flexing the hip joint, rather than remaining upright.

That regular hip flexing suggests regular tree climbing, the study authors say. The new analysis points to the difference between physiology and behavior, and complicates the story of how our ancestors learned to walk on two legs. SIMILAR PRESSURES, DIFFERENT RESULTS — We know that, in the past, many different hominin species lived at the same time, sometimes encountering and possibly even mating with one another. Living in the same time and place means experiencing similar environmental pressures, feeding adaptations that evolved over time to produce us.

But the new research shows how evolutionary traits are far from clear-cut. The two bones came from individuals that both lived in Sterkfontein Caves, which are situated within the aptly-named "Cradle of Humankind," a large area that's been the site of numerous ancient human discoveries. One of the most famous, and oldest, individuals found there is Little Foot, a nearly full skeleton from the Australopithecus genus. New research shows that Little Foot had a combination of human- and ape-like features — with a little of each just in its ear. But though they lived in the same place, the two individuals in the new study existed hundreds of thousands of years apart.

The Australopithecus africanus bone is between 2.8 and 2 million years old, while the (possibly) Paranthropus robustus femur is likely younger, about 2.2 million years old. That timeline does not suggest a linear progression from tree-swinging to ground-walking. Rather, the unidentified hominin proves that having the ability to walk on two legs doesn't necessarily mean a species is spending most of its time on the ground. Plus, while that mystery hominin seems to have been a habitual climber, the bone density scans suggest it did not climb with the same frequency as nonhuman apes. The discovery challenges the “prevailing view of a single transition to bipedalism."

Even after humans began walking on two legs, they were still climbing trees regularly. “It has been challenging to resolve debates regarding the degree to which climbing remained an important behavior in our past,” study co-author Matthew Skinner, a paleoanthropologist at the University of Kent, said in a statement accompanying the research. “Evidence has been sparse, controversial and not widely accepted, and as we have shown in this study, the external shape of bones can be misleading.” WHAT'S NEXT — Skinner says that further analysis of these bones could upend more common beliefs of how different parts of human bodies worked — including “hands, feet, knees, shoulders and the spine.

” The analyses could paint a brighter picture of how humans evolved, including important developments like being able to make and use tools from stone. Abstract: Bipedalism is a defining trait of the hominin lineage, associated with a transition from a more arboreal to a more terrestrial environment.

While there is debate about when modernhuman-like bipedalism first appeared in hominins, all known South African hominins show morphological adaptations to bipedalism, suggesting that this was their predominant mode of locomotion. Here we present evidence that hominins preserved in the Sterkfontein Caves practiced two different locomotor repertoires.

The trabecular structure of a proximal femur (StW 522) attributed to Australopithecus africanus exhibits a modern human-like bipedal locomotor pattern, while that of a geologically younger specimen (StW 311) attributed to either Homo sp. or Paranthropus robustus exhibits a pattern more similar to nonhuman apes, potentially suggesting regular bouts of both climbing and terrestrial bipedalism. Our results demonstrate distinct morphological differences, linked to behavioral differences between Australopithecus and later hominins in South Africa and contribute to the increasing evidence of locomotor diversity within the hominin clade.

## 2. Australopithecus afarensis Had Ape-Like Brain Organization, But Prolonged Brain Growth Like Humans

Human brains are three times larger, are organized differently, and mature for a longer period of time than those of our closest living relatives, the chimpanzees. Together, these characteristics are important for human cognition and social behavior, but their evolutionary origins remain unclear. To study brain growth and organization in the hominin species Australopithecus afarensis (famous for ‘Lucy’ and ‘Selam’ from Ethiopia’s Afar region) more than 3 million years ago, an international team of researchers scanned eight fossil skulls using conventional and synchrotron computed tomography.

Published in the journal Science Advances, the findings show that while Australopithecus afarensis had an ape-like brain structure, the brain took longer to reach adult size, suggesting that infants may have had a longer dependence on caregivers, a human-like trait. Australopithecus afarensis inhabited eastern Africa more than 3 million years ago — Lucy herself is estimated to be 3.2 million years old — and occupies a key position in the hominin family tree, as it is widely accepted to be ancestral to all later hominins, including the lineage leading to modern humans.

“Lucy and her kin provide important evidence about early hominin behavior — -they walked upright, had brains that were around 20% larger than those of chimpanzees, and may have used sharp stone tools,” said Dr. Zeresenay Alemseged, director of the Dikika field project and researcher at the University of Chicago.The scientists produced high-resolution digital endocasts of the interior of Australopithecus afarensis’ skulls, where the anatomical structure of the brains could be visualized and analyzed. Based on these endocasts, they could measure brain volume and infer key aspects of cerebral organization from impressions of the brain’s structure.

A key difference between apes and humans involves the organization of the brain’s parietal lobe — important in the integration and processing of sensory information — and occipital lobe in the visual center at the rear of the brain. The exceptionally preserved endocast of Selam, a skull and associated skeleton of an Australopithecus afarensis infant found at Dikika in 2000, has an unambiguous impression of the lunate sulcus — a fissure in the occipital lobe marking the boundary of the visual area that is more prominent and located more forward in apes than in humans — in an ape-like position.

The scan of the endocranial imprint of an adult Australopithecus afarensis fossil from Hadar (A.L. 162-28) reveals a previously undetected impression of the lunate sulcus, which is also in an ape-like position. Some scientists had conjectured that human-like brain reorganization in australopiths was linked to behaviors that were more complex than those of their great ape relatives. Unfortunately, the lunate sulcus typically does not reproduce well on endocasts, so there was unresolved controversy about its position in Australopithecus. “A highlight of our work is how cutting-edge technology can clear up long-standing debates about these 3-million-year-old fossils,” said Dr. William Kimbel, a paleoanthropologist in the Institute of Human Origins at Arizona State University. “Our ability to peer into the hidden details of bone and tooth structure with CT scans has truly revolutionized the science of our origins.”

A comparison of infant and adult endocranial volumes also indicates more human-like protracted brain growth in Australopithecus afarensis, likely critical for the evolution of a long period of childhood learning in hominins. The pace of dental development of the Dikika infant was broadly comparable to that of chimpanzees and therefore faster than in modern humans. But given that the brains of Australopithecus afarensis adults were roughly 20% larger than those of chimpanzees, the Dikika child’s small endocranial volume suggests a prolonged period of brain development relative to chimpanzees. “The combination of apelike brain structure and humanlike protracted brain growth in Lucy’s species was unexpected,” Dr.Kimbel said.

“That finding supports the idea that human brain evolution was very much a piecemeal affair, with extended brain growth appearing before the origin of our own genus, Homo.” Among primates, different rates of growth and maturation are associated with different infant-care strategies, suggesting that the extended period of brain growth in Australopithecus afarensis may have been linked to a long dependence on caregivers. Alternatively, slow brain growth could also primarily represent a way to spread the energetic requirements of dependent offspring over many years in environments where food is not always abundant. In either case, protracted brain growth in Australopithecus afarensis provided the basis for subsequent evolution of the brain and social behavior in hominins and was likely critical for the evolution of a long period of childhood learning.

## 3. Homo erectus Existed 200,000 Years Earlier than Previously Thought

An international team of paleoanthropologists has unearthed a 2-million-year-old skull of Homo erectus, the first of our ancestors to be nearly human-like in their anatomy and aspects of their behavior, in the fossil-rich Drimolen cave system north of Johannesburg, South Africa.Homo erectus is one of our direct human ancestors and is best known for migrating out of Africa into the rest of the world. They walked upright and were a more human-like species than the other hominins found in the Cradle of Humankind.

Homo erectus had shorter arms and longer legs. They could walk and run for longer distances over the African grasslands than the others. “The Homo erectus skull we found shows its brain was only slightly smaller than other examples of adult Homo erectus,” said Professor Andy Herries, a researcher at La Trobe University and the University of Johannesburg and corresponding author of a paper published in the journal Science. “It samples a part of human evolutionary history when our ancestors were walking fully upright, making stone tools, starting to emigrate out of Africa, but before they had developed large brains.” The 2-million-year-old fossil, designated DNH 134, was reconstructed from more than 150 individual fragments recovered from the Drimolen site over a five-year period. “Before we found DNH 134, we knew that the oldest Homo erectus in the world was from Dmanisi in Georgia dating to 1.8 million years ago,” said co-author Stephanie Baker, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Johannesburg. “

The newly-discovered fossil demonstrates that Homo erectus, our direct ancestor, clearly evolved in Africa,” added co-author Jesse Martin, a Ph.D. student at La Trobe University. The age of the DNH 134 skullcap shows something else — that at least three hominins lived in southern Africa at the same time. “Unlike the world today, where we are the only human species, two million years ago our direct ancestor was not alone,” Professor Herries said.“We can now say Homo erectus shared the landscape with two other types of humans in South Africa, Paranthropus robustus and Australopithecus.” “This suggests that one of these other human species, Australopithecus sediba, may not have been the direct ancestor of Homo erectus, or us, as previously hypothesized.” “The new crania offered an unparalleled insight into how three different human species, with quite different adaptations, shared a changing environment together,” said co-author Angeline Leece, a Ph.D. student at La Trobe University.

“The discovery raises some intriguing questions about how these three unique species lived and survived on the landscape,” said co-author Dr. Justin Adams, a researcher at Monash University. “One of the questions that interests us is what role changing habitats, resources, and the unique biological adaptations of early Homo erectus may have played in the eventual extinction of Australopithecus sediba in South Africa.” “Similar trends are also seen in other mammal species at this time.

For example, there are more than one species of false saber-tooth cat, Dinofelis, at the site — one of which became extinct after two million years." "Our data reinforces the fact that South Africa represented a truly unique mixture of evolutionary lineages — a blended community of ancient and modern mammal species that was transitioning as climates and ecosystems changed."

**4. What caused the disappearance of the Homo Neanderthalensis, a species that seemingly had as many capabilities as the Homo Sapiens?**

There are several theories that attempt to explain it: the climate, competition with the Homo Sapiens, low genetic diversity… A study that Valencia University (UV) participates in has analysed the first cervical vertebra from several Neanderthals and confirms that the genetic diversity of the population was low, which hindered their ability to adapt to possible changes to their surroundings and, therefore, their survival. The study has been published in the 'Journal of Anatomy'.

Professor Juan Alberto Sanchis Gimeno, from the Department of Human Anatomy and Embryology at the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry of the UV, the National Museum of Natural Sciences (MNCN-CSIC) and the National Centre of Research on Human Evolution (CENIEH) all took part in the study. Three vertebrae from the Kaprina (Croatia) site have been analysed, and material from other sites has been revised. Neanderthals populated the European continent merely 30,000 years ago, and their disappearance continues being a mystery.

Work deciphering their genome has been conducted to learn their genetic diversity, as well as analysing different anatomic traits of the fossil register of the species. “In this study we focused on the anatomic variants of the first cervical vertebra, known as the atlas. The anatomic variants of this vertebra have a strong link with genetic diversity: the greater the prevalence of this type of anatomic variants, the lower the genetic diversity of the population,” explains MNCN researcher Carlos A. Palancar.

In Homo Sapiens, the anatomic variants of the atlas have been thoroughly studied in recent years. In the case of modern humans, the atlas shows anatomic variants in almost 30% of cases. “However, probably due to the bad preservation of this cervical vertebra and the limited material recovered in the fossil register, the atlas of Neanderthals have been looked at this way,” explains UV professor Juan Alberto Sanchis Gimeno. Recently, researchers from the Palaeoanthropology Group of the MNCN established the presence of several anatomic variants in the atlases of Neanderthals of the El Sidrón (Asturias) site.

With the objective of confirming the high prevalenceof the anatomic variants of this species, the fossil atlases of Neanderthals from the Krapina (Croatia) site have been thoroughly analysed. “Krapina is a site that is around 130,000 years old, compared to the 50,000 of El Sidrón. It is the site from where the largest amount of Neanderthal remains have been recovered, which makes it a sample of especial interest for the analysis of the genetic diversity of this species, as all individuals potentially belonged to the same population,” says Daniel García-Martínez, researcher at the CENIEH. The study of the anatomy of the three atlases recovered at this site has revealed the presence of anatomic variants in two of them (66%).

One of them, known as Unclosed Transverse Foramen, UTF, has a prevalence of just 10% in modern humans. “Verifying the presence of these anatomic variants in Krapina, along with the revision of other atlases submitted to the scientific community, which has not been analysed from this viewpoint heretofore and which offers similar data (over 50%), suggest that the amount of variants in Neanderthals is significantly greater than in current humans," says Palancar. "This data supports the theory that their genetic diversity was very low and confirms that it could have been one of the causes for their disappearance," concludes MNCN researcher Markus Bastir.

## SOCIO – CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

### 1. Children of Extramarital Affairs Were and Are Rare: Study

**Topic in syllabus : Paper 1 Chapter 8 Genealogical method and Chapter 9.4 DNA application**

Using DNA data, researchers track family dynamics in Europe over the last 500 years and find socioeconomic status is related to married women having a child with a man other than their husband.

Researchers analyzed the Y chromosome and genealogy data of 513 pairs of men living in Belgium and the Netherlands. Based on the genealogy data, each pair shared a common paternal ancestor and therefore should have had identical Y chromosomes, unless there was a case of adultery, or what scientists call extra-pair paternity. The study confirmed that the vast majority—99 percent—were indeed genetically related through their paternal lineage, which the authors say buck some common assumptions.

Study coauthor Maarten Larmuseau of KU Leuven was inspired to run the study after looking at a 17th-century painting (pictured above) called "Celebrating the Birth." In the work, artist Jan Steen shows a celebration centered on the birth of a baby. An older, seemingly wealthy man holds the baby, and behind the child's head another man raises two fingers, a sign of antlers, representing cuckoldry.

"Together with many other paintings and historical references in theatre and literature to cuckoldry, you would assume that there was potentially a higher extra-pair paternity rate among aristocratic families in which there was a large age gap between husband and wife," Larmuseau tells *Newsweek*. "Therefore, we started our study to test if historical extra-pair paternity rates could indeed differentiate among specific groups [and] strata within a population."

The results showed that overall extra-pair paternity was low, only turning up in about 1 percent of the cases, though the result depended on socioeconomic status. Extra-pair paternity showed up in 6 percent of cases of urban families with low socioeconomic status living in densely populated cities in the 19th century, the researchers report today (Nov. 14) in *Current Biology*.

"It is notable that low rates of extra-pair paternity hold in this sample across several centuries given that the details of complex lives are missing," anthropologist Peter Gray of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who was not involved in the study tells *Newsweek*. "If anything, we might expect more noise given uncertainties about child adoption or fostering; acknowledged but hidden infidelity and suspected extra-pair paternity; and how marriage and remarriage might cover up some genetic relationships."

This isn't the first time Larmuseau and his colleagues have investigated the question of extra-pair paternity, nor is his team the only one to ask the question. Genetic studies have repeatedly challenged the idea that mistaken paternity is common, yet the myth persists.

## 2. Proving the language/culture connection

Several anthropologist called attention to the research report produced by Princeton University (link to full report here). The headline touts the research with the claim that "Machine Learning reveals role of culture in shaping the meaning of words". My response, and that of many others, was immediately snarky – we didn't particularly need computers to tell us something that has been amply demonstrated by the entire field of linguistic anthropology for the better part of a century, and by plenty of people paying attention for even longer.

There was a bit of pushback on these comments, which ultimately all share a certain thematic element – that even if we already knew this, we, as linguistic anthropologists, should welcome this work, and the attention being paid to it, as a new methodology that supports what we know and do. The problem with this claim is...it doesn't do that at all. And here, I have to own up to the fact that my own initial flippant response absolutely does suggest that it does, as I noted "the machines have caught up to my opening lecture in intro to linguistic anthropology". It is, of course, true that culture shapes meaning within languages, and that we teach that as a central principle of the discipline.

The problem is, what the authors of this study mean by that and what we mean by that are fundamentally different things, as becomes apparent when you read beyond the headline. At a certain point, I hoped that reading the paper itself would mitigate some of the concerns I had, but alas, while obviously written in a somewhat less hyperbolic way, the conceptual foundation, methodological application, and interpretation involved in this paper is, to my mind, a frustratingly flawed contribution to the study of the intersection of language and culture, for reasons outlined below. The crucial issue for me is how the authors define 'culture' and establish a quantified version of 'cultural similarity'. In order to make this machine-based analysis work, culture has to be reduced to a checklist of features. To do so, the authors did in fact draw on anthropology – specifically, the Ethnographic Atlas available at D-PLACE, which is based on the work of GP Murdock and his students.

There's an interesting anthropological rabbit hole to go down in examining the disagreements between Murdock and Edward Sapir, and critically considering Murdock's emphatically 'scientific' and mathematical approach to studying human social differences. What I would ask the authors in this case, though, is whether they have chosen this approach to studying culture after a careful consideration of historical and contemporary thinking about the concept, or mainly because it is the one that allows them to fit the question of culture into the computational mold they wish to explore.

Even the assumption that "languages" map neatly onto "cultures", as opposed to containing multiple ways of speaking, or 'languages' being spoken by diverse groups of people, or to having culture defined by multilingual and multivocal practices, doesn't hold within contemporary linguistic anthropology. Further, and relatedly, while the Princeton report about the study touts it as covering a remarkable number of languages, 41 is in fact an absolutely tiny drop in the bucket of global linguistic diversity — a point that becomes even more apparent when you look at the actual list of languages, which include 25 from the Indo-European family, 4 Turkic languages, 3 Uralic, and 1 each from the AfroAsiatic (Arabic), Sino-Tibetan (Chinese), Dravidian (Tamil), Kartvelian (Georgian), Japonic (Japanese), and Koreanic (Korean) families, as well as Basque.

While I was pleasantly surprised at a few of these inclusions (Georgian and Basque wouldn't fall in to the 'usual suspects' list), most of the list is extremely predictably narrow. Further, one might ask whether these labels even hold up all that well – which Englishes are represented here, or which versions of Spanish, Chinese, or any other "language"? This narrowness is made even worse as the analysis selects further and further for focus on Indo-European languages, because those are the ones about which the kind of diachronic language change information being used to classify degrees of linguistic/historical similarity is most available.

The authors don't justify this choice beyond the convenience level – or really, at all. Even to find the list of languages, one has to follow the links to get to the 300 pages of supplementary material that they provide. This indicates to me that they don't think their choice of languages used to make conclusions about 'universal' meanings and patterns of language culture relationships requires explanation.

A broader consideration of language at a global level would require attuning to the complexity of the concept of 'words', to the ways in which meaning is established in practice, or to the implications of things like polysynthesis in how these forms of 'universality' emerge. To illustrate what I mean, consider how the study talks about kinship terms and alignment. For the authors, the machine analysis demonstrates that this category of terms (at least the most 'common' ones – the examples they give are 'daughter', 'son', and 'aunt') tend to translate into other languages with a high degree of shared meaning. But ethnographic analyses of kinship practices would suggest that even if the terms 'translate', they are used in extremely diverse ways.

In many parts of Latin America, the Spanish/Portuguese terms 'tia' and 'tio', which translate as 'aunt' and 'uncle' are used to refer to almost any adult engaging with children, so during fieldwork in Brazil, I would often be introduced to kids by adults saying something like "Essa tia vem do Canadá" ("This auntie comes from Canada"). Sticking with languages represented on the list here, Susan Blum's work on "Naming Practices and the Power of Words in China" is one that I have assigned to introductory ling anth classes to talk about how many cultural beliefs we take for granted, such as the role of names and kinship terms, are in fact demonstrably diverse. Blum's work is a good example that illustrates how "meaning" is not reducible to semantic "content" or "translatability", but rather has to be understood in terms of social practice. In other words, even asking the question of "what does this kinship term mean?" requires us to understand how a given culture approaches such "meaning".

This starts to get at what I mean when I say that what this work 'proves' does not, in fact, align (pun intended, #sorrynotsorry) with what linguistic anthropologists talk about when they study how meaning is different across cultural contexts. There are major assumptions in the computational work that contradict the understandings of language and culture that most of us work within, and in particular, ignore the ways in which we examine language as a dynamic social practice. The ethnological Atlas material is, of course, not the only criterion the study uses for identifying cultural proximity, but digging in to other aspects of the analysis reveals similar assumptions.

As my friend Lavanya Murali noted to me, the treatment of geographic proximity and shared linguistic history, for example, doesn't really contend with the dynamics of how people interact across linguistic boundaries such that similarities can be produced through interaction, rather than as an inherent property of language — with both these elements, in turn, abstracted from an idea of "culture".

All of this, for me, calls the conceptual framework that this research relies upon into question, and at the very least, demonstrates that this work doesn't support linguistic anthropologists' claims about language and culture. As such, this is not a matter of saying the same thing with different methodological evidence, but rather saying something completely different based on an entirely distinct set of assumptions about language and culture – ones that, in fact, I work really hard to teach students to examine as ideological claims rather than fundamental truths.

This even presents something of a meta-commentary, as it's worth noting that meaning doesn't even align within languages, and that the meaning of ‘meaning’ isn’t always clear and translatable — I could go on, but you get the point. In addition to all this, I want to ask — why this research? Why ask these questions? This has been a central piece of the critique I have brought to my less-sarcastic Twitter comments, and that still holds after reading the study itself. The researcher interviewed makes the claim that this is the first “data driven” approach to the question, and further explains that the motivation comes from a desire to improve upon the time-consuming need to do things like “conduct long, careful interviews with bilingual speakers who evaluate the quality fo translations”.

The first comment is illustrative of a widespread belief that ethnography is not data, and that valorizes the quantitative and mathematical as “proof”. As many people noted, one of the reasons this raises our hackles is that we have been “proving” the interrelationships between language and culture in any number of ways for years, and this work actually doesn’t engage with any of that material, preferring instead to jump back several decades and use a dataset that conforms to pre existing assumptions.

The second point is more nuanced, but equally worth addressing – what’s wrong with long, careful interviews? In fact, one of the reasons that the list of languages used here is so limited is because those are the ones for which a sufficient amount of long, careful interviews, recorded material, and myriad other forms of data are available. It’s not clear to me, then, that this kind of work in any way does away with the need to develop that material in the first place, raising the question of what it accomplishes.

As I noted in tweets, the decisions about what questions to ask are ones that deserve scrutiny, because resources are spent investigating these questions, which means those resources aren’t available for other questions. And if resources are being consumed doing research that ignores and dismisses work on apparently related topics, it does have a negative impact on that work – so, speaking for myself, as a linguistic anthropologist, it’s disappointing and frustrating to see not only the promotional elements of this work, but to see how the project itself represents the questions that we even need to understand regarding language and culture

## 3. Live-in to legal, community weddings empower women

A **tribal community of Jharkhand** following **'Dhuku'** tradition of live-in relationship, as they are unable to marry **due to poverty** in the community.

- They are getting married through **'community marriages'** organised by the help of a **NGO and facilitated by district administration and Coal India Ltd in the state.**

Background

- The concept of Live-in is not new in India, it was known with several names since the **ancient times.**
    - It was known as **'maitri-karar'**in which a written agreement was made between people of two opposite sex that they would live together **as friends and look after each other**.
- Similarly**, Gandharva marriage**, one of **the eight Hindu marriages**, has its roots in the concept of live-in.
    - **A man and woman meet each other of their own accord, consent to live together, and their relationship is converted to copulation born of passion.**

**What is Dhuku marriage?**

- Staying with **a man in a relationship**, **bearing their children without getting married**, without any **social acceptance** and legal rights - this is an **Adivasi tradition** in Jharkhand, known as **'dhuku marriage'.**

- According to the tribal community norm, the woman is recognised as ‘Dhukni’ and the man is called 'Dhukua'.

**Highlights of the tradition**

- It is a **civil cohabitation** and is approved **before and after pregnancy** and even after the birth of children.
- But dhuku marriages are a **social bane**for tribals in Jharkhand.
- The **Munda, Oraon, and Ho tribes** primarily practice Dhukna in tribal-dominated rural areas of Jharkhand, and such marriages have been flourishing in **patriarchal tribal communities** for centuries due to **poverty and illiteracy.**
- **Dhuku marriage is a compulsion, not a choice**, and tribals for centuries have been deprived of basic social recognition and respect because of poverty.

**Legality of live-in relationships**

- In India, no specific legislation or customs is governing the same.
- Thus, the Supreme Court has elaborated the concept of live-in relations through its Judgments and has issued guidelines to deal with such relationships.

- In the case of *Lata Singh v. State of U.P,* the Court held that though live-in relationships are perceived as immoral it is not an offence under the law.

- In another famous case of Khushboo v. Kanaimmal and Anr. the Supreme Court held that living together is a right to life covered under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution; thus, despite being considered immoral by society it is not an offence in the eye of law.

# INDIAN & TRIBAL ANTHROPOLOGY

## 1. Health of tribal populations in India: How long can we afford to neglect?

In today's globalized and inter-connected world, India's population including those belonging to scheduled tribes (ST) is undergoing demographic, socio-economic and health transformation. According to the 2011 census, the tribal population in India was 104 million, constituting 8.6 per cent of country's population, up from 8.2 per cent in 2001 census. Belonging to some 705 different ethnic groups, they are scattered across 30 States and Union Territories of India, and having diverse cultural and life practices.

The tribal population primarily inhabits rural and remote areas and is among the most vulnerable and marginalized section of the society. Moreover, they lag behind all other social groups in various social, health and developmental indicators. Without addressing the concerns of vulnerable population, India's socio-economic transformation will remain incomplete and it will not be possible to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals for which India is committed itself along with other countries.

## Why tribal health matters

In 2011, while 40.6 per cent tribals were below the poverty line, the proportion among the rest was 20.5 per cent. In the health area, the key indicators among tribes remain very poor. For example, according to the National Family Health Survey 4 (NFHS-4) (2015-2016), the under-5 mortality among the tribal population was 57.2 per 1000 live births compared to 38.5 among others, and the infant mortality rate (IMR) 44.4 per 1000 live births versus others of 32.1. A child born to a ST family in India has 19 per cent higher risk of dying in the neonatal period and 45 per cent greater risk of dying in the post-neonatal period compared with other social classes.

One telling example of disparity for tribals relative to rest of the population comes from Kerala State where in 2013 the lowest IMR of 7 per 1000 live births was reported. The rate in tribal community of Wayanad, the district having the largest tribal population in Kerala, was 41.47, according to a UNICEF-assisted study. This was cited also in the comptroller and auditor general (CAG) of India, 2014 report.

Child malnutrition rates are also significantly higher and poverty more common for tribal populations compared with other populations. In a cross-sectional study conducted in 2015, three-fourths (76.6%) of the 2926 under-5 children surveyed among tribal district of Melghat in Maharashtra, India, were found to be severely or moderately undernourished. The situation of undernutrition is extremely worrisome in most tribal areas. For example, according to the NFHS-4 data, 94.7 per cent of children below five years of age and 83.2 per cent of women between the age of 15 and 49 in tribal district of Lahaul and Spiti in Himachal Pradesh were suffering from anaemia.

The prevailing situation is in large part due to the fact that ST population has for centuries suffered from neglect from policy point of view. Even today, areas where tribals live, the health services remain grossly underdeveloped and population access to good quality health services is at best abysmal.

## Disease burden

A relatively limited data set available on the health conditions and disease profile of the tribal groups across the country shows that the diseases affecting tribal population vary from area to area, depending on the environmental and social conditions and cultural practices prevalent in each area. Especially vulnerable are the primitive tribes who have some unique health problems and challenges, needing special attention by the government.

The vector-borne diseases such as malaria have a huge and disproportionate adverse impact on the tribal population. The tribal districts (having ≥30% of the population considered as tribal) which comprise about eight per cent of the country's population contribute to 70 per cent of the dangerous malaria strain *Plasmodium falciparum* and 47 per cent total malarial deaths in the country.

Available evidence indicates that the prevalence of tuberculosis (TB) is significantly higher among tribal populations; 703 per 100,000 compared to the national average (256 per 100,000). The *Saharias*, a primitive tribe in Madhya Pradesh, is particularly vulnerable to TB, with alarmingly high prevalence of 1518 per 100 000 population. To achieve End TB by 2025 as envisaged by the Prime Minister, focus on TB hotspots in tribal areas must receive urgent priority attention.

Conditions such as haemoglobinopathies and thalassaemia are unique and important health challenges for tribal population living, in particular, in the North-East, West Bengal, Odisha and Andaman and Nicobar islands and Madhya Pradesh. Better understanding of the problem including its management and control is critical. Glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) deficiency is also high in tribal communities.

While there is an increasing trend in the prevalence of chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and cancer throughout India, associated with the use of tobacco, lack of physical activity and consumption of unhealthy diet, a similar increase is also being experienced by the tribal populations in India. At the same time, the level of awareness and knowledge and health-seeking behaviour among tribals were found to be low. There are, however, examples to show that with political commitment and concerted efforts, a difference in the lives of the tribal population can be made.

## Opportunities and the way forward

The following steps are urgently needed to address the prevailing health situation of the tribal population:

First, the governments both at the Centre and States must recognize improvement in the health status of the tribal population as among the topmost priorities from policy point of view and ensure adequate budget allocations made including under the National Tribal Plan. The Government of India (GOI) constituted Expert Committee on Tribal Health has recommended that the government per capita expenditure on tribal health should be substantially enhanced and that 70 per cent of this should be spent on primary health care[6]. Allocation of at least eight per cent of the national budget assigned for tribal welfare in accordance with population size, a dedicated focus on infrastructure development and ensuring service delivery in an efficient manner will make a difference. Besides augmenting resource allocation, the common practice in the governments of diverting the scant resources meant for tribal development for other purposes, as indicated also by CAG report must be stopped.

It is also important to have experts belonging to STs in policy-making bodies including those dealing with health. The problem of non-representation has been highlighted by the special committee on tribal issues constituted by the GOI, stating that one of the key reasons for poor health service in tribal areas, is 'near complete absence of participation of people from the ST or their representatives in shaping policies, making plans, or implementing services in the health sector'. Finally, it is imperative to focus on enhancing the overall development of tribals to try and bridge the prevailing inequalities and disparities in the country.

## 2. Mahua to be sold as 'heritage liquor' in Madhya Pradesh; experts call for a GI tag, too

**"There is such an amazing alcohol wealth that we have in our country that is not celebrated"**

Mahua, a liquor made from mahua tree, will soon be sold as 'heritage liquor' in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Chief Minister said Monday that the government will soon have a new excise policy in place that will enable tribals in the state to brew liquor from the mahua tree flowers in the traditional way and even sell it.

For the uninitiated, mahua is the madhuca longifolia tropical tree, which is found largely in the central and north Indian forests. It has, for many years, earned and maintained the reputation of yielding liquor and intoxicating substances that are unique to this country. As such, legalising it is a significant decision, which will now ensure more outreach and cultural and culinary interest.

We reached out to some experts to understand what they think of this decision. Sangeeta Khanna, a nutrition and culinary consultant, who teaches food design with a focus on sustainable food systems, said until four decades ago, mahua was very much a part of the food system, especially for those people who were dependent on forests. “Mainly the tribal and other rural communities. Liquor, of course, was part of the culture and it still is, but they mostly consumed the flowers and the fruits, and even the seeds were used to make oil — a good quality cold-pressed oil,” she said.

Khanna explained over the years, with the availability of similar products in the markets, the dependence on the mahua tree and the consumption of its products decreased, too.

“Mahua was also used for medicinal purposes; now it has only been reduced to alcohol brewing. In the next few years, however, it can get the status of a good-quality mahua wine in India. But right now, tribals do not disclose they brew liquor, owing to the negative connotation attached to it. It is no secret that the brewing happened anyway, but over the years, the traditional usage of the tree got lost,” she remarked.

Kurush Dalal, an archaeologist and culinary anthropologist said it was “about time” that liquor brewing was legalised. “[The brewing] has probably been done for the last thousand years by these peoples. Their rights were trampled upon in the colonial era, to the extent that mahua trees were decimated, because it was considered puritanically wrong to consume alcohol. Mahua is technically the only flower, which is fermented for alcohol. This makes it a unique product — one that needs a GI tag. This is such an amazing alcohol wealth that we have in our country that is not celebrated.”

According to Dalal, there needs to be a regulation in place, along with “going beyond the tribals and allowing others also to do the same thing”. “If it is exclusively tribal, then they need to figure out how to leverage it. There have been mahua festivals for years — it is eaten, its oil is consumed, the tree is virtually worshipped. What is incredible is the fact that mahua flowers are never plucked from trees. They are always only collected when they fall. It is a sustainable way in which mahua has been consumed by the tribals, and there needs to be a network to support them," he told this outlet.

There are many Indian states where the mahua tree is found and grown. It is adaptable to arid environments and seen in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, some parts of Telangana, Kerala, Gujarat, West Bengal and even Tamil Nadu.

Indian academic, food critic and historian Pushpesh Pant said legalising mahua does not make a difference because the tribals have been brewing it regardless, and that, too, of good quality. "Wherever there is ban, there is illicit liquor, death and misery. This legalisation of an indigenous thing is a bit of a *tamasha*."

Pant explained mahua tree is synonymous with mild intoxication. "The Vedas mention '*somras*', but not mahua, because the Vedas were written in the North-West Frontier Province of undivided Punjab where the mahua tree does not grow."

## 3. The Tharu People of Don Valley in the Valmiki Tiger Reserve

### The Naurangia Village of the Tharu

Tharu people living within the deep jungles of the alleged Mao-infested Valmiki Tiger Reserve, West Champaran in Bihar. With land holdings ranging from mere 1 to 2 *katthas*, these people's hand to mouth existence is evident. Yet the upkeep of their mud baked houses, well oiled hair, clean clothes and general appearance speak of higher cultural endowment.

Hospitality aside, the Tharu of the Naurangia village of Don are a quiet lot with almost every question thwarted with a pretty smile or a counter question. Unlike their tribal cousins some 25 odd kilometers away in the so called capital of Tharuvat at Harnatand, the Tharu of Samrahni and

Naurangia in Don are tight lipped about most issues.
It is said that some 400 years ago a noble lady eloped with her trusted servant leaving the desert sands to colonisethe mosquito infested terai. The myth justifies the higher social position of women within the Tharu, resulting in their greater autonomy in decision making, higher literacy as compared to their Bihari counterparts, and general well being.

Interestingly, they pursue education and attend regular classes even after marriage – completely unheard of among non Tharu women in the vicinity. The Tharu as a community is today scattered across the Himalayan foothills of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Bihar in India, and along the southern forested regions in Nepal. In Bihar, the Tharu settlements are concentrated in Harnatand – a flat stretch of about 45 square km, surrounded by the Don and Someshwar hills. Within the Valmiki Reserve

Forest area, there are 25 Tharu dominated villages, largely agrarian in character.

Handicraft is her passion she insists, showing me the other items that she has painstakingly woven. Although she believes that marketing their craft would be a viable employment alternative, she finds few takers. As her peers gathered around, Phulvati withdrew into a shell, preferring to answer in monosyllables.

Rukmani, a young student returning home from the only girls' school in the vicinity, fanned the dying conversation with an interesting revelation about paddy cultivation similar to tribal traditions in Jharkhand.

Certain proportion of the paddy cultivated is placed in a community granary, *dharambakhar*, a reserve from where the villagers can borrow, not for direct marketing or monetary benefits, but for household consumption. The only condition is that borrower has to return the borrowed quantity on an agreed upon date. Women, as is usual among this community, maintains the granary and its records. No Tharu, Rukmani proudly adds, goes hungry.

A religious lot, the Tharu women of Don are more Hindu than tribal, with *Shivaratri*and *Dassera*occupying a prominent place. Wearing the orange vermillion mark of marriage, the Tharuwomen sport accessories almost similar to their non Tharu counterparts. One significant difference in attire is the acceptance of *salwarkameez*as regular wear post marriage and the beaded neck pieces with silver or gold lockets, reminiscent of Nepali marriage norms.

Moving around in bands, the women here adjust their day to day routine in such a manner that they are never alone, out in the wilderness, cycling. Although women emancipation appeared alive and kicking in this region, yet the norm of underage marriages was disquieting. By the time the girls are ten or twelve, marriage proposals are sought and the first child in most cases is born around fifteen.

The dependency on their kin is such that despite lack of medical facilities, schools and markets, Tharu women belonging to these villages prefer to pull in their marriage partners to share their homes, rather than shift out to live with them. This phenomenon translates into a sharper rise in the population within. In this respect, the non Tharu population living within the forest precincts too behave in a similar fashion.

The Valmiki is the only Tiger Reserve in the State of Bihar covering 840 square km. For management purposes the forest is divided into two broad divisions, which is further divided into six ranges. The core area of the forest and the Valley of Don lies in Division Two,within the Harnatand Range.

Their share of fun is sadly sans culture."Only last night", gushed Jayavachan, "we had aCD show. More than three hundred people from around the area gathered. Such occasions are like night long festivities." The CD show I gathered,was a movie and judging by their Bollywood knowledge, such arrangements where the CD player is brought in from beyond the forest boundaries for a night, seemed quite frequent. The crowd she added never turns rowdy, despite the fact that *gadla*, local brewed rice liquor, flows freely.

These revenue villages within the forest area were traditionally rice growing. In recent times the shift is palpable with sugarcane dominating the landscape. A more water intensive option, sugarcane farming the Tharu say provides better remuneration than paddy.

Farmland in the midst of forested tracts, which may be seen at the periphery. | The Tharu are shifting from paddy farming to sugarcane farming, as it provides better remuneration.

Unable to access the only sugar mill in the locality, the Bagaha Sugar Mill, some 40 kms away in a precarious terrain and in retaliation to exploitative mill owner keeping payment pending for two or three years – small *gur*or jaggery making units have cropped up in an around the villages.

As these villages are located near the core forest area, extraction of fuelwood is easy and is used in abundance to process the sugarcane juice to *gur*. However, these small-scaleunits, often produce inferior quality jaggery, which has less market value and poor consumption potential. Instead, it is transported to Nepal and also sold in the Indian market to prepare liquor. While the Tharu of Don replace paddy with sugarcane to earn more from their land, many now face food shortages and have become dependent on either government rations or village granaries.

As night fell, I left Phulvati's charming cottage adorned with posters of Lord Krishna alongside Jesus Christ and motifs in English, which read 'welcome' and 'Prem'. Juxtaposed against habitations beyond the forest boundary, such inclusions seemed out of place. Perhaps the linkages of these groups need further exploration.

**4. Tribals in Gujarat intensify protest against Par-Tapi Narmada river-linking project**


The protest against the Par -Tapi Narmada river-linking project proposed by the Centre in South Gujarat seems to be gaining momentum day by day.

AHMEDABAD: Ahead of the Gujarat assembly elections slated for December this year, the BJP government in the state faces the opposition heat on a slew of issues.

The protest against the Par -Tapi Narmada river-linking project proposed by the Centre in South Gujarat seems to be gaining momentum day by day. On Friday, more than 10,000 tribals in 50 buses and small and big vehicles reached Gandhinagar Satyagraha Chavni (camp) to stage a protest.

According to the tribal community, the hospitals and schools in tribal areas across Gujarat are in a dilapidated condition. Even as the land of the tribal community is usurped for various projects, basic facilities were denied to them.

Congress legislature and tribal leader Anant Patel said, "our community has been fighting for its existence for centuries. At present, the condition of the tribals is very bad. Justice is denied to us. Water supply is not available for the tribals even though the river passes through the tribal area. There is no electricity. The government writes off the debts of industrialists, but does not provide jobs to the youth of our community We will fight even if we have to fight like Birsa Munda."

Congress attempted to gherao the State Assembly building over the Par-Tapi Narmada- river-linking project, but the protesters were detained by police.

Meanwhile, farmers from around the district drove in tractors to Pethapur village to stage a protest. But the police detained them halfway through. Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (Indian Farmers Union) warned that if the power crisis of agriculture is not resolved within 72 hours, there will be a statewide agitation.

Reacting to the farmers and congress protest Gujarat government spokesperson and Cabinet Minister Jitu Waghani said "The state government is with the farmers. Necessary arrangements are being made to ensure adequate power supply to them. Congress has no choice but to provoke the farmers. The state BJP government has implemented various schemes for farmers. Only 51,551 agricultural electricity connections were provided from 1960 to 1995 while 14,63,739 agricultural electricity connections were provided from 1995 to 2022."

**What are the tribals' fears?**

The districts where the project will be implemented are largely dominated, by tribals who fear displacement. Three public meetings have already been oragnised by the tribals to protest the project. The fourth meet will be held in Kaprada in the Valsad district. After Kaprada, one more public meeting is due to be held at Mandvi in Surat district, the date for which is yet to be announced.

The movement is backed by Samast Adivasi Samaj, Adivasi Samanvay Manch, Adivasi Ekta Parishad and Congress MLA Navsari Anant Patel.

## 5. Rights have been historically dormant for tribal communities in India

### History of tribal communities in India

During the pre-Mughal period in India, tribals, or *adivasis*, were not considered impure by the upper caste Hindu population, unlike dalits. Even the adivasi origins of Valmiki were recognized. Unlike the dalits, who were subjugated by upper caste populations in Mughal India, tribal communities in India living in remote habitations had control over their lands (S. Meena & N.P.S. Meena, 2014) based on their segmental organization according to descent systems where their form of lifestyle ranged from hunter-gatherer to agriculture.

This sporadic form of life where tribal communities in India collectively owned land not under larger obligations was disrupted by the spread of the Mughal empire in India, wherein the challenge to sovereignty over ownership of land and the resulting acculturation led to numerous revolts by tribal communities in India against the Mughal rulers. Prominent rebellions against the Mughal rulers include those of the Bhils in 1632 and of the Bhil-Gonds in 1643 (S. Meena&N.P.S. Meena, 2014).The arrival of the British in India was greeted with a similar sort of antagonistic reaction over land ownership and use of resources.

**The British and the tribal communities in India**

The land policies of the British were very invasive of the rights of the tribal communities in India over their inhabited land. A succession of invasive land policies such as the jagirdari system, the zamindari system and the permanent settlement that the British imposed in Bihar and Bengal exacerbated the already simmering tension between tribal communities in India and the British administration. These convolutions in land policy led to migration of non-tribals into tribal-inhabited land, exploitation of forest resources by non-tribals, especially private interests, deprivation of forest resources and relative impoverishment, coerced taxation systems that ultimately led many to work as bonded labourers, attempts by the British to destroy some tribes out of xenophobia and the spread of disease epidemics among certain tribes such as among certain Andamanese tribals coming in first contact with the outside world (B.K. Pattnaik, 2013). The British period was the period of dispossession of many native tribal communities in India from their land and resources and their subsequent re-organization under the so called â€˜civilizing missionâ€™ by the British.

The 19th Century witnessed the establishment of a Forest Department by the British along with certain legislations that made it possible for the British to economically extract forest resources. The sustainable methods of traditional use of forests and the needs of forest ecologies were bulldozed by these revenue-centric legislations, which continued after India's independence in 1947. The widespread evictions of tribal communities in India from forests due to the timber economy and other revenue sources, and the laws enacted that instead of protecting the historical propriety of tribals over forests, made their land alienable as commercial property, eventually led to concerns over the rights of tribal communities in India over forests. The numerous rebellions against the British by tribes such as the tribals of Bastar, the Kuki, the Nagas, and the Santhals are all examples in this regard.

Although the Indian Forest Act came into being in 1927, which held the condition that any forest area or wasteland that was not privately owned could be marked as reserved areas, no particular system of settlement rights were formulated for tribal communities in India living in forests, and large areas were not surveyed for this purpose. Tribals involved in agriculture continued to practice without official land ownership. This created instead a system of patronage for the government under which nobody was allowed to use resources from forests without permissions garnered from the forest department. The practice of logging, hunting, foraging, or agriculture by tribals and non-tribals alike under this system thus constituted encroachment.

**Post Independence and tribal communities in India**

After independence, the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 was another instance of tribal settlement rights not being included in forest legislation, whereby protection to wildlife habitats created systems of patronage towards the state. Apart from destroying crops sown by tribal communities, tribal communities were seen as such a nuisance that often forest department officials would start plantations by tribal lands with the objective of evicting them. Thus since the time when the rights of tribal communities in India over their residential forests and practices such as hunting and shifting cultivation were unrestricted, a very long period ensued without any such rights recognized, even in forest conservation.

https://www.geographyandyou.com/life/tribes/guarding-their-forests-bhil/

Although most tribal communities in India have been living in forests for a large part of their history, many tribal populations, especially those in eastern India such as Nagas and Khasis have come into the mainstream. However, even so these populations are collectively relatively less well off than the rest of India in the socio-economic aspects. In terms of socio-economic development, two groupings of tribal development in India can be said to have formed. One grouping consists of tribal populations that have assimilated into the mainstream culture, have undergone acculturation to varying extents, and in many instances are not even a primarily agrarian community. They have been the chief beneficiaries of much of the Indian government's tribal development programmes that create opportunities for people from tribal communities. However, there is another grouping of tribals such as the Dongria Kondh of the Niyamgiri Hills battling against encroachments by mining companies such as Vedanta (Survival International, 2017) who still suffer the effects of the oppressive land policies that led to their dispossession and impoverishment in modern India and some of whom who still live in forests or work in shifting agriculture or as agricultural labourers.

The Forest Conservation Act, 1980 that was a response to a crisis of deforestation as a result of the British colonial legislative infrastructure, seemed to justify the historic dispossession of rights for tribal communities over forests that have alienated tribal communities in India against the government. The protests over this act propelled the government to table the National Forest Policy, 1988 that saw for the first time that the livelihood needs of tribal communities in India in forests are more important than commercial needs. Other than addressing the livelihood needs of forest-dwelling communities, with the provision of forest-related employment for individuals from tribal communities, the act also offered protection for the customary laws of tribal communities with respect to forests.

After recognition of settlement rights of tribals over forest land, the early nineties experienced pressure being put on the government by activists and human rights movements to bring these into practice. Their activities culminated in the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution that offered decentralized governance in rural areas and instituted the Bhuria Committee to extend tribal rights over resources by providing the provisions of the Amendment to Schedule V areas. Based on the recommendations of the Bhuria Committee, the Parliament passed the Panchayats Extension to Schedule Areas Act (PESA), 1996 that recognized a Gram Sabha system for tribal communities and recognized the customary rights of tribals over community resources such as land, forests and water (S. Joshi, 2017). However, till contemporary times the Act has not been fully enforced as regards tribal populations.

Since then many policies have been instituted to provide rights to tribal communities in India such as the policy of Joint Forest Management that have not been able to adequately delineate the rights of tribal populations in rural, remote and forest areas. The main obstacle has been local level specifications and the wide variety of customary interdicts and norms of tribal communities in India. The approach has usually been a top-down approach that fails to adequately address local level intricacies. This lack of last mile delivery creates a lot of ambiguities that translate into agency being routed on the ground, usually outside the prescribed frameworks, lending erroneous consequences to policies. Tribal rights over issues such as evictions continue to be addressed mostly by peopleâ€™s movements and active organizations such as Survival International.

**Recognition of Forest Rights**

The watershed legislative document so far in regard to tribal rights has been the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The Act recognizes the rights of occupation of forest lands by tribal communities even when their rights are not recorded, with the stipulation however that the occupant must have lived in the forest with at least three generations of lineage since 13.12.2005, with 1 generation being 25 years. The Act fixes a maximum area of 4 ha for occupation of forest land, including rights for lands falling under national parks and sanctuaries. The Act allows for self-cultivation of forest land and usufructuary rights over minor forest produce falling under the aforementioned area for forest-dwellers belonging to the Scheduled Tribe category. The Act provides for in-situ rehabilitation of Scheduled Tribes who have been evicted or displaced from their forest-dwelling habitats. These rights are heritable but not transferable and importantly stipulated that no member of any forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes can be evicted or removed from the area the person holds rights in, which although is subject to verification. The Act recognizes Gram Sabhas as competent authorities for initiation of procedures for rights under this Act (S. Joshi, 2017). The Act is a huge landmark, for it for the first time clearly demarcates the rights of tribal communities in India over forest land. This makes the Act invaluable in preserving the cultures of tribal communities in India and also in correcting the historic alienation of tribal communities from land that has in many instances left them with a diminished identity.

**Tribal Exclusivity vs Tribal Assimilation**

The debate over tribal exclusivity as against tribal assimilation usually take place over the issue of the sovereignty of the tribal group. The tribal movements in central India such as those of Bastar and among the Dongria Kondh take the issue of displacement and erosion of livelihoods as the focal point. Similarly many tribes in northeastern India such as Bodos and Karbis claim rights over land claiming to be the original inhabitants of the land areas they occupy.

The problem in India among many tribal communities is one of alienation, and this is intensified by the processes of globalization and homogenization. Tribal assimilation is a problem especially when attempts towards bring individuals in sync with modern life results in a reactionary movement towards essentialism. This comes with a lack of imagination in developmental thought in India towards communitarian understanding at the lower levels of governance, which interacts the most with tribal communities.

Often cross-cultural understanding is missing in a lack of an understanding of compositeness in an ideologically saturated modern civilization, lending prejudice to hold sway over relativistic inferences, which reinforce the normative basis of modern civilization. The lack of last mile service delivery places tribal communities in a disadvantageous power matrix in an absence of the understanding they require. Tribals are not seen as substances for conservation and bearers of history. Their exclusivity and sovereignity must be recognized in terms of their identity for any scientific assimilation and progress to take place, else it becomes a recipe for social unrest for the country, as history proves.

## 6. At This Unique Odisha Eco-Stay, You Can Enjoy Waterfalls & Learn From Tribals

Priya Krishnan Das writes about her wonderful and exotic experience of living in Desia Koraput — an eco-stay inside a tribal hamlet in Odisha.

I had first read about the tribal markets in Odisha around three years ago, it was instantly on my list of places to visit. A search for accommodation in that region led me to the Desia Koraput website and after numerous email exchanges with the founder, Yugabrata Kar, I landed in the tribal hinterland.

Two cab drives, one flight and an overnight train journey later, I arrived on a sunny winter afternoon in Desia Koraput and I was welcomed with purple flowers and wide smiles by the entire staff. The staff is a mix of local tribals — the Bonda, Mali and Harijan, well trained in hospitality including aspects such as laying of tables, presentation of food, setting up the rooms, etc.

The community-run eco-stay is set in a remote village called Bantalabiri, around 60 km from the nearest town Koraput, in South Odisha. It is run by tribal communities and is one of its kind in the region with lush landscapes, dense forests and tribal culture.

I was here to experience tribal cultures, conduct drawing workshops for the tribal children and document my travel experiences through my sketches. The eco-stay sits nestled surrounded by tall Nilgiri trees and verdant surroundings of vegetable patches and mango tree orchards exuding a rustic charm.

Since it was winter, I loved waking up in the morning to a dream-like misty garden while the tall Nilgiri trees stood in a trance like state waiting for the sunlight to interrupt their dream.

The cottages themselves are uniquely constructed to blend with the earthy surroundings. Yugabrata had brought in an Architect from Shantiniketan, Bengal, who combined his ideas with those of the traditional construction style of the region. Thus the cottages are made of rammed earth, painted white and rusty red. The interiors are decorated using Odisha handicrafts like straw baskets as lampshades and applique cloth lanterns. Instead of curtains, there are white drapes on the window giving it a vintage feel. The rooms have a rustic charm as well as a contemporary feel to make the urban traveller feel at home.

The Desia project employed more than 100 local families in different aspects of setting up based on their skills. Currently, there are around 10 to 15 local people from different tribes working at Desia. The staff was trained in Puri at a tourism institute and gained knowledge of the day to day operations that go into the eco-stay.

I explored the renowned markets that occur in Desia. The first was the Thursday market at Onakadelli where the Bonda, Dhuruva, Mali and Gadaba tribes assemble to sell their forest produce as well as alcohol. There is a variety of alcohol like those made with rice, mahua flowers, and the fruit of the palm tree. I sampled a bit of all three.

My guide, Kusho, suggested that we pay the sellers with biscuit packets instead of cash and to my surprise they were overjoyed at receiving biscuits. The second section of the market is where the Mali tribe bring their fresh produce of vegetables. I was delighted to see the vegetables, roots and leafy vegetables, fresh from the farm, and would have loved to load a truck full of them back home if it was possible.

En route to the Onakadelli market, we stopped at the majestic Duduma waterfalls, formed by the Machkund River which separates Odisha from Andhra Pradesh. The Duduma cascades down into the rocky outlet into the narrow gorge below. The views are breathtaking from above and I couldn't help but sketch from two different angles.

Another weekly market happens on Saturdays at Lamtaput. One of the staff members, Punnu, and I travelled in a shared colourful village auto-rickshaw to the market. Here the Mali tribe people get their fresh vegetable produce and exchange them in return for grains and legumes. The market was abuzz with vegetable stalls, hawkers selling live chickens, stray cows wandering between the stalls and a police patrol team doing rounds announcing over the loudspeaker and instructing people to keep their masks on.

Back at the eco-stay, I conducted drawing classes for children every afternoon. I taught them to draw from observation as I do. The children are from tribal communities nearby. Although there is a local government school, their students face a lot of difficulty in coping with their school curriculum due to a lack of proper attention and guidance.

So to give the children a more well-rounded education and learning, Yugabrata has hired a tutor who comes daily and teaches the children history, math, songs, etc. on the premises at Desia. There are around 15 children in the age group of 5 and 12 and I found them to be very well mannered, polite and eager to learn drawing. Most children were using colours for the first time and it was indeed a delight to see the happiness on their faces as they played with colours.

Another wonderful initiative at Desia is setting up a tailoring class for the local women at Desia. Yugabrata has hired two teachers who teach the women tailoring on weekdays. At present, there are seven sewing machines and they learn how to stitch blouses and salwar kameez amongst other things. This will empower them financially as tailors.

I was also invited to watch a Dhemsa tribal dance performed by the people of the neighbouring Bantalabiri village. Men were playing traditional percussion and wind instruments while the women formed a chain to dance and match steps with the music.

Having seen the Bonda women at the alcohol market with their thick necklaces and colourful beads adorning their bodies, I planned a trip to the Bonda village called Bondaghati with my guide. The Bondaghati lies secluded and took around a 2-hour drive from Desia Koraput. I was struck by the number of children in the village. There were groups of people everywhere either chatting or watching some activity like the butchering of a pig or goat. The women went about their chores like cleaning the front yard of the house or grinding grains. The Bondas are one of the 62 distinct tribes in Odisha with their distinct language, attire and beliefs. They are animists and forage in the forest every day for roots and small animals in addition to practising some agriculture. In the last two months, the Border Security Force (BSF) deployed in that area has brought basic amenities to them like water storage cans, utensils, rain shelters and bedding.

It is also noteworthy that although being quite remote, the government Covid vaccination program covered all the people of Bondaghati successfully.

## 7. Farmer Learns From Tribals, Brings Assam's 'Ready-To-Eat' Rice Variety to Telangana

Srikanth Garampally, a farmer from Telangana, grows magic rice, or boka saul. This variety is mostly grown in Assam, and can be cooked in 30 minutes by simply soaking it in either hot or cold water. The rice requires no fuel to cook, and contains 10.73 per cent fibre and 6.8 per cent protein.

In a fast-moving world where cooking is often deemed cumbersome, ‘ready-to-eat’ food items are the way to go. Along similar lines, a farmer from Telangana is cultivating magic rice, which only needs to be soaked in hot or cold water before it’s ready to be eaten.

“I come from an agricultural family, and soil is my first mother,” Srikanth Garampally (38), who hails from Karimnagar district, tells **The Better India**.

Srikanth has been a farmer for 30 years. “Apart from magic rice, I also have a collection of 120 rice varieties, including navara, mappillai samba and kuska,” he says. Besides, he also cultivates 60 varieties of paddy and organic vegetables on his 12-acre land, which he has taken on lease.

Srikanth’s tryst with magic rice began two years ago, during a temple visit in Orissa. “There, I met a person who was standing with me in the queue to collect prasad. We struck up a conversation, and I introduced myself as a farmer. When I told him about my collection of rice, he asked if that included magic rice. That’s how I first heard about it,” he says.

Srikanth forgot to ask his new friend for his contact information, but had managed to attain enough information about this new variety of rice, in terms of who cultivated it and how it is cooked. He then travelled to Assam, where magic rice is grown, and visited Gauhati University to understand which breed of this rice was best to cultivate.

University authorities helped him select the boka saul, or mud rice. They told him that the rice, which requires zero fuel to cook, contains 10.73 per cent fibre and 6.8 per cent protein. The Government of India’s Intellectual Property India (IPI) body has also given the rice a GI tag. The authorities also told Srikant that he can learn more about the cultivation process if he visits the lower Assam tribes, and hill regions like Nalbari, Darrang and Dhubri.

**'With good intentions'**

Right away, Srikant went to visit the Assam tribes. "There's a misconception that the tribes will attack people from outside communities, but if you approach them with good intentions at heart, they will help you. When the tribe members found out I wanted to grow boka saul and make it more accessible and available to our future generations, they were more than happy to help," he says.

He lived with the tribes for more than a week to learn more about magic rice. There, he was taught about the cultivation process, and how it was similar to cultivation of regular paddy. The tribe was moved by the farmer's dedication, and gifted him 100 grams of magic rice before he left for Telangana.

Some time around June 2020, Srikanth, with help from his wife and parents, began cultivating the magic rice on a small patch of his land, and harvested around 15 kilos. "The cropping period is 145 days. I used some rice to take back home, and distributed the rest to the Gauhati University, and my friends and relatives," he says.

He adds that the rice can be made by soaking in either hot or cold water for about 30 minutes, and its temperature will depend on that of the water. "My personal favourite," he says, "is hot rice with sliced banana, mixed with curd. My three kids prefer eating it cold, and my wife and parents like it hot," he says.

From the 15 kilos, Srikanth collected around 5 kilos for cultivation this year. "I don't want to see this cultivation from a financial angle. I will use my yield as seeds to produce more. Maybe, after three or four years, I'll sell the rice to people, depending on the harvest," he says.

## 8. My Tribe Has Been Criminalised For 200 Years; I'm Helping Thousands Win Their Rights Back

Deepa Pawar's own experiences as a member of the gadhiya lohar tribe shaped her organisation Anubhuti Trust, a women-led organisation that works for upliftment of India's nomadic and denotified tribes.

For Nomadic and Denotified Tribes (NT-DNT), August 31 marks an additional Independence Day. In 1952, the Government of India repealed the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, in hopes that members of NT-DNT communities would find a secure future, one free of discrimination, after facing years of violence and vilification.

In the 1800s, when the British government had passed the Act, it had branded almost all tribes falling under this category as being "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences". Their occupation, social practices, and very appearance were evidence enough of criminal activity. Adult males would often have to give *hazoori*, i.e, report weekly to the local police. Many restrictions were imposed on movement, and unlawful arrests, unjust punishment, and denial of even necessities were commonplace.

What has changed since these so-called criminal tribes were denotified in '52? *The Indian Express* wrote, "Many denotified tribes continue to face the 'taint of criminality' — the police, courts, and society continue to view them as criminals. Narratives of genetic criminality have been replaced with narratives of economic need, group immorality, compulsive indiscipline, or addiction to narcotic substances. They are default suspects in cases of theft and dacoity — indiscriminate detention, arrest without warrant, recording of photographs and fingerprints for surveillance and custodial torture continue to be methods practised by state agencies against these communities."

Pawar, who belongs to the nomadic *gadhiya lohar* community, runs Anubhuti Trust to initiate this very mainstreaming. This women-led organisation, launched in 2015, works for the upliftment of NT-DNT communities through areas of mental justice, leadership training, inclusion in sociopolitics, addressing sexual and reproductive health rights, and more. So far, they have worked across 15 Maharashtra districts to benefit thousands of community members with these programmes.

**'Will we be able to survive this?'**

Raised in Thane's Badlapur city, Pawar began working in the social sector when she was only 14. Around the same time, she and her four sisters lost their father. Before that, the family lived in a tent in a *basti*, where Pawar would help her father out while he wielded weapons and tools from iron. "But after he passed, I knew continuing my education would not be possible without an additional source of income," she recalls. "So taking up social work was, at first, more from the need to be able to study than anything else. I'd get Rs 300 per month."

Pawar worked with various NGOs for over 16 years, mainly for the development and empowerment of women. But her work helped her come to terms with a peculiar fact.

The women that she was working to empower were indeed way above her own community in societal hierarchy. "They needed a lot of aid in almost all aspects. And yet, the community that I come from lacked even the very basics that they had — like a shelter over our heads," she says.

"Any time a disaster, political upheaval, or any sort of distress happens, NT-DNT communities are left with one question — will we be able to survive this?" Pawar notes. "For this, accessing the rights laid down for us in the Constitution is extremely important."

This idea forms one of the core programmes of Anubhuti. Their constitution literacy programme is called *Hum Samvidhani*. "We target marginalised youth here, those who exist in extreme poverty, face caste bias and vulnerabilities, and so on."

"We look at the fundamental rights in our Constitution and what they dictate. For example, someone's sex, religion, caste, etc does not warrant discrimination and violence. But when someone is unaware of these, there's a sense of social guilt that follows. They begin thinking they are weak, and deservedly so, so they surrender before the institution that oppresses them, without realising that their rights dictate otherwise."

The programme goes to colleges across districts to directly address the youth, alongside training elected leaders and other stakeholders. "Then these leaders go on to work in social justice, equal participation, constitutional opposition, and more. They will address their health, needs of water and sanitation, and the like." The youth are engaged through debates, arts, music, and theatre.

The second programme focuses on community resilience. "Our communities are robust from within and have been able to sustain for centuries. We have our own sign languages, with which we were able to communicate with the British. Different communities have in-built skills in arts, athletics, and more. But marginalisation weakens that. So we focus on building these capacities — reducing domestic violence, early marriage, caste hierarchies within the tribes, and relief work, especially now during COVID."

**How mental health ties in with human rights**

She adds, "How to reduce mental panic and addiction, address local politicians, provide moral support — we address these questions as well."

Another programme works for mental justice. “An individual is not always solely responsible for their mental collapse. Societal hierarchies, gender bias, inequalities, caste violence, communalism…they all play a role here. And privileges are subject to change. For NT-DNTs, too, mental deterioration happens due to their place in society. We believe any individual’s mental health is tied to their rights and the justice they get.”

She notes, “I remember that when I was working with my father if there was any case of violence or dispute in the area, authorities would question us. They’d ask, in the most insulting and disrespectful ways, if we were the ones who supplied the weapons. It would leave us humiliated in public. So when things haven’t changed in 200 years, since when the Act was passed, how can this community’s mental well-being be ensured?”

## 9. Koraputia Gandhi: The Forgotten Legend Who Served Odisha’s Tribals for 77 Years

Despite his illustrious life, his simplicity is what earned him ever-increasing respect among people of Odisha, as well as India. Though his life came to an end on May 29, 2010, his spirit and unwavering pulse to help common people, has truly immortalised him forever!

He was just 17 when he decided to dedicate his entire life for the betterment of others. A legendary Gandhian and one of the most notable social workers from Odisha, Biswanath Pattnaik, has changed thousands of lives, leading many through the iconic 1951 Bhoodan Movement (land gift movement) under the guidance of his mentor, Acharya Vinoba Bhave.

In the words of Raghunath Rath, an ardent follower, who has spent his life researching on tribal issues: “He was the last true Gandhian of Orissa. They do not make people like him. He never ran after awards unlike many social activists of today.”

Born among poor tribals in Odisha on November 11, 1916, in a village called Kumarada, in Ganjam district, Biswanath, like many around him, has faced the darkest struggles for survival. Yet unlike many, he wanted to make an effort to change it.

After losing his father, Upendra, at a very young age, he grew up with his grandfather, Ghanashyam, and studied in a village school. However, aspiring for better education, he moved to Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh, but only sustained his studies till Class 8 and dropped out.

In search of meaning, he moved back to his village, this time as an informal teacher, at his old village school, on a monthly salary of seven rupees. It was then that he met a Gandhian, Gopabandhu Choudhury and began to work as his assistant. Under his guidance, Biswanath travelled to Koraput to help expand the khadi movement there. His extensive work became so popular in Koraput that it earned him a pseudonym, the Koraputia Gandhi.

In 1940, he arrived in Kujendri, and began focusing on the tribal communities of the area, especially those who are differently-abled. His productive work to empower the communities further spread to Baliguda as well.

From putting up a strong stand against various social evils like dowry system, superstitions, untouchability, and illiteracy among others, to helping children, women and senior citizens get education, livelihood and shelter, Biswanath has been a force in reforming Odisha’s social fabric.

It was this fearless sense-of-purpose to battle against all forms of injustice perpetrated against marginalised communities and a promise of a dignified life for them, that gave him the strength to start Banabasi Seva Samiti along with Gopabandhu in 1972, in Balliguda, Kandhamal district. Since its inception, the organisation has been selflessly taking up issues of education and the upliftment of poor tribesmen, and run several residential schools for tribal students, vocational educational institutions, old age homes and orphanages.

The vocational educational institutes for self-reliance set up by Biswanath has now spread to four different centres benefitting more than 300 children.

Under the organisation, as many as 14 crèches were opened for children up to 3 years. Furthermore, one of his prominent projects, A Nutritious Food Project continues to help hundreds in Balliguda, catering to the needs of malnourished children, pregnant and nursing mothers.

Years ago when skill development was still a new concept, the Samiti, under Biswanath’s leadership was able to set up a printing press to help children learn to print while opening up employment opportunities in the long run. With an agriculture and kitchen garden, a dairy farm and a carpenter unit, the Samiti has been trying to change lives for the better holistically.

His constant efforts to better the socio-economic situation in these areas has inspired many youths to take the baton of change. Owing to this, in several villages, youth-driven campaigns have pushed them to zero alcoholism.

Additionally, to help the villages be self-sufficient economically, he introduced many income generating schemes like mulberry plantation, silk production unit, nutrition food production packet unit, dairy farm, agriculture project, printing press, and carpentry work among others.

He was a social worker, a close associate of Gopabandhu and Vinoba Bhave, a freedom fighter who joined the Quit India Movement and a ray of hope for all the marginalised communities of rural Odisha, who for decades, have been reeling under the injustices of the landowners, intermediaries, officials and many others.

His relentless work eventually earned him the prestigious Best Social Worker Award from the Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh, New Delhi, in addition to the Justice Rajkishore Das Award in 1996-97, and the 23rd Sarala Award 2002 for outstanding contribution in the field of social work.

The next year, he received the Rajiv Gandhi Sadbhavana Award for dedicated social service, followed by the Jamnalal Bajaj Award in 2008 for his selfless constructive work in tribal-dominated areas of Kujendri and Baliguda, Odisha.

Despite his illustrious life, his simplicity is what earned him ever-increasing respect among people of Odisha, as well as India. Though his life came to an end on May 29, 2010, his spirit and unwavering pulse to help common people, has truly immortalised him forever!

## 10. Shatavari to Queen Sago: How We Used Rare Forest Produce to Double Tribal Incomes

Dr Manju Vasudevan and Dr Sreeja KG founded Forest Post, a venture to help tribals generate sustainable livelihood and with products made from shatavari and other rare produce

In Kerala, amid the Chalakudy and Karuvannur River basin, dwell the indigenous tribes of Kadar, Malayar, and Muthuvar. These tribal groups sustain mainly through forest produce.

For the last four years, ecologist Dr Manju Vasudevan has worked closely with these communities to secure their livelihood and encourage the conservation of nature. In 2017, she joined the River Research Centre, a Kerala-based NGO, to spearhead various development projects for these tribal groups.

With river rights activist Dr Lata Anantha, Dr Manju, who holds a doctorate in pollination ecology, began working towards empowering tribal communities with forest rights. She would often venture with tribals into the forests to learn about their lifestyles and understand them better.

It was here that she found an abundance of Shatavari (asparagus), which the tribals used to make pickles. When some of the product was offered at a local event, a buyer said he was interested in more derivatives of the produce.

This experience inspired her to make products from rare forest resources such Shatavari honey, oils and more.

**Creating a sustainable enterprise**

But here, Manju found herself at a crossroads. "I had always worked using the cooperative model of enterprise building, training women groups in the value addition of non-timber forest products (NTFP), and strengthening local economies," she says.

Manju had to decide whether to continue in the same manner or dive into a social enterprise. "As a non-profit NGO, we could not enter a business. But selling the forest produce helped the tribals earn additional income. Hence, the same year, Dr Sreeja KG, a colleague and an expert in agriculture and climate change, created a sister entity, Forest Post, providing a platform for tribals to market traditional and authentic products created using sustainable methods," she says.

Today, their entity is helping over 60 tribal people who work in tandem with the social enterprise, producing and selling products.

"The indigenous forest-dwelling people in the Western Ghats collect a range of wild resources from the forest that include leaves for medicine, roots and bark of the tree for food, oils, medicine, tubers, honey, beeswax, tree resin such as black dammar (thelli), fruits such as jackfruit, gooseberry and soapnut. We started preparing unique products out of them," she says.

The handmade products include beeswax personal care, herbal hair oils, rare wild foods and bamboo craft. "We are working with tribals from villages such as Karikkadav, Anapantham, Chimmony, Kallichitra, Adichilthotti and Vazhachal," she adds.
With an online presence, the social enterprise is receiving orders across India. "Though the business is in nascent stages, the number of orders are increasing and have grown threefold. Earlier we received one order a month which has now increased to three times. The recent order we received was 400 soaps, double the previous ones. We have also been supplying products to offline stores such as Tribes India and at airports," she explains.

Kanakamma, one of the stakeholders at the enterprise, says, "I learned how to make bamboo baskets from other women in the village. We procure bamboo from the forest and sell the products made from them via Forest Post. We earn more profits than we did before." Dr Manju says the company is now in the process of tying up with hotels and other conscious brands that are willing to pay a premium and show a commitment towards sustainability.

Being a first-generation entrepreneur, she says she made many mistakes at multiple levels, including the logistics, procuring of raw material, wages and raising capital. "We received help from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in terms of brand strategy, product marketing and other aspects of the business," she says.

"Our brand has a unique identity and stands for values around sustainability. We are against palm oil, and our products using traditional resources make a statement against the import of the same, or converting rainforests to grow palm trees," Dr Manju says.

She adds that a question that worries her is the massive exploitation of resources when the number of orders increases. "We have ensured to keep a cap on the number of resources harvested from the forest. For example, queen sago is a rare forest product used for value addition in products. We ensure that it is used seasonally and in limits," she shares.

"Through the venture, we want to set an example that adivasis can find secure livelihoods close to their ancestral domain without jeopardising the future of the forests and can take on stewardship roles in conservation," she says.

## 11. The Tiffin Box is Transforming a Remote Assam District, Thanks to this IAS Officer

Poor human development, acute infrastructural shortages, lawlessness – these were the challenges facing #IAS officer Keerthi Jalli when she took charge in Jan 2019. Less than a year later, she has scripted a remarkable turnaround! #Governance

Marked by poor human development indicators, acute infrastructural challenges, regular incidents of communal strife, and lawlessness, Hailakandi district in the Barak Valley of Assam isn't the easiest posting for officers of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). When Keerthi Jalli, a 2013-batch IAS officer, took over as Deputy Commissioner in January 2019, she was quite literally entering the lion's den.

However, nine months into the job, the Hyderabad native is scripting a remarkable turnaround in this 'forgotten land' which borders Bangladesh. Determined to oversee an image makeover of this 'aspirational district', her focus has remained on addressing acute developmental challenges, particularly health, bridging relations between different religious and tribal communities through food, and empowering women.

With the daunting figures in the 2015 National Family Health Survey for the district, the challenge before her is enormous:

-47.2 per cent of Hailakandi women are anaemic due to misinformed eating, particularly among local tea garden workers.

-Of the 70 per cent rural households, 33.5 per cent of children under the age of five are underweight.

On an average, each family has five children, making Hailakandi, the district with the highest fertility rate, says the local administration. As per 2018 figures, the district stood last in Assam in terms of the percentage of students passing Class X.

A big part of addressing these concerns is to establish people's confidence in the district's machinery. The IAS officer has, to some extent, gained their trust following a series of administrative reform measures.

In earning their faith, it has given Keerthi the foundation to further her development initiatives.

**Child health, nutrition & variety**

Keerthi, in conversation with **The Better India**, says, "Malnutrition is a serious concern with those suffering from anaemia. Yes, Anganwadi centres offer *khichdi*, and we deliver regular mid-day meals. However, the children here were getting tired of eating *khichdi* every day. There is only so much *khichdi* you can eat. While spreading awareness on nutrition during 'Rashtriya Poshan Maah' (Centre-led nutrition awareness drive conducted last month), we felt that the district could experiment with traditional cooking."

This led to the idea of introducing *amla gur* (gooseberry jaggery) candy.

The administration introduced it as a replacement for the not very preferred iron-folic acid tablets for pregnant women, mothers and children that they consume to treat iron deficiency anaemia.

"During Poshan Maah, Anganwadi workers visited households and talked about nutrition with the parents. In this exercise, we asked mothers to come forward and make these *amla gur* candies. It's a very simple recipe, but very tasty with ingredients found locally. *Amla* is a major source of Vitamin C, which offers better immunity. Alongside *amla*, we are using black *gur*, highly rich in iron. This experiment has taken off with families coming up with different recipes to make the *amla gur* candies," informs the Deputy Commissioner.

When mothers started bringing their local *amla gur* candies, the administration thought to extend it to the local food recipes as well. They requested mothers to cook and carry their food once a week so that their kids could exchange their *dabbas* (tiffins) with each other under Dibbi Adaan Pradaan initiative.

"It's a voluntary activity and happens once a week as an addition to the standard Supplementary Nutrition delivered by Anganwadi centres and the take-home ration. For example, a Reang (a tribe known in Mizoram as Brus) recipe is being tasted by a Bengali child while a Muslim child is tasting a Marwadi recipe. While tribals bring boiled vegetables, Bengalis bring *luchi* and others get *seera* (flattened rice) *ladoos*. Each child at the Anganwadi is now telling the other 'try out my mother's cooking'. This generates excitement among them to try new and tasty food. Even grandmothers have gotten into the act as well. Mothers are now exchanging recipes and trying them in their homes," she says.

Consequently, a child gets to enhance his nutritional palette. This has also fostered a healthy competition among mothers, children and different communities, who have taken ownership of this initiative. With Poshan Maah over, the administration is continuing this practice on Village Health

Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSNDs), which are scheduled to take place in every village once a month.

In cities, we have the option of trying multiple cuisines. This option does not exist in districts like Hailakandi. Children get bored with the same old cooking.

"Just the fact that communities are engaged in an exchange of recipes strengthens relations between them and children get to taste various recipes. The Reang community, for example, have a lot of bamboo shoot-based recipes, a good source of protein. It's an exciting way of bringing communities together, and at the heart of it is food," informs Keerthi.

**Protecting girl child, empowering women**

"When I first came here, I barely saw any women on the streets. When my mother went to the market, she felt uncomfortable. Bringing women out of society-imposed taboos surrounding their ability to work and have a career of their own has been a real focus," shares Keerti.

For the Deputy Commissioner, who is also the first female IAS officer to serve in the district, real development begins with empowering women. Without giving them an equal stake in the development process, districts like Hailakandi, suffer disproportionately.

"If a society improves, its women who often drive that change. A healthy and educated woman ensures that a family runs well. Well-run families ensure societal progress," she claims.

Last week, on International Girl Child Day, the administration launched the Kanya Taru Yojana for every mother in the district who goes to government hospitals and delivers a girl child. They are offering parents fruit-bearing saplings alongside Rs 250 for fertiliser expenditure with the hope that they spend the profits from these fruits-bearing trees on the girl child.

Last week, more than 2485 mothers were given seedlings of trees such as guava, coconut, Assam lemon, litchi and amla. The administration is on the cusp of collecting complete data on the number of children born in hospitals and health centres around the district, and each mother would receive this package upon their release from the hospital.

“She has started a project called Matri Deep, in which we are now closely tracking high-risk pregnancies using an app. Besides, she openly addresses different villages and communities about sanitary pads, contraceptive use and the need for family planning. Our administration has even released a short film on it because Hailakandi suffers from a very high total fertility rate. She has also approached religious leaders and community activists to broach the subject of family planning,” says Parikshit Phukan, the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO).

Under her leadership, all health sub-centres have been renovated through various modes of CSR

Besides health, another mode of empowering local women in a district steeped in toxic patriarchy has been to assist self-help groups (SHGs). Applying the Kudumbashree model developed in Kerala, the administration is giving them access to markets for their products.

The district administration has introduced value addition to the traditional Sylheti artform of Sheetal Patti (mats woven out of bamboo cane). The SHG, where women make these Pattis, now makes cell phone pouch holders, file folders and decorative home items too. These will be purchased by the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd and other organisations.

“Moreover, for the first time in the **Northeast**, we have given the contract of cleaning 3 railway stations to local SHGs. Each SHG is paid Rs 15,000 per month for one-two hours of cleaning everyday. We are also planning to start a pineapple processing unit,” informs Keerthi. The district even instituted a plastic ban, and SHGs are manufacturing paper and cloth bags.

Nonetheless, unemployment remains a major concern, particularly among women.

For example, under the National Rural Skill Development Mission, women are generally sent for parlour training or weaving, while men are admitted into data entry operator training.

“Contrary to the traditional skill forms, I expressed my strong desire for an all-women batch of data entry operators. Even the vendor who conducts these training programmes was warned that he wouldn’t get a single penny if there aren’t women in the class,” she recalls.

Yet, getting these women out to pursue work like data entry in cities like Delhi, Kolkata or Chennai was a challenge. It took Keerthi six months to gather these women, conducting counselling sessions, visiting their homes to convince them how this was a good idea, word of mouth and a big advertising campaign.

Last month, the administration inaugurated the class of 45 girls in the 21-35 age group. By December these women will finish the course with assured placements. These girls have promised Keerthi that they would take up the job and agree to head out wherever they are placed. “This is probably my proudest achievement, in delivering the first all-woman batch of data entry operators in the whole of Assam,” she claims.

**For the future**

Winter is the working season in Hailakandi following months of rain. For the foreseeable future, the focus will be on mobilising funds and resources of basic infrastructure development, besides a host of health and education-related initiatives.

“What is heartening is that when we try to reach out to the community, they respond despite all the challenges. It shows that they’ve been thirsty for someone to reach out to them. The best takeaway from this journey that change is indeed possible,” says Keerthi.

“It’s been more than a year since she was posted here. She has brought in real energy and spirit into the district. On an administrative level, for example, doctors are now regularly attending to their patients not only out of fear, but a genuine desire to change. Practically, it will take time for these changes to take effect on the ground, but in another five or six months people, we will see it for sure. We have seen genuine public participation in her initiatives with thousands thronging for them. The people indeed feel that change is coming," says Parikshit.

## 12. IPS Officer Helps 5000 Telangana Tribals Get Access To Medical Aid Worth Rs 7 Lakh

Superintendent of Police Dr Sangram Patil, who left behind his medical career to join the civil services, has used his medical prowess to help the members of the Gotti Koya tribal community gain better access to healthcare

Maharashtra-based Dr Sangram Singh Patil earned his medical degree and became the third generation in his family to become a doctor. For a year and a half, he practised medicine at a hospital in Delhi.

Some, time later, on the advice of a friend, he decided to deviate from his family's traditional route, and begin preparing for civil service examinations.

"While studying, I was also taking care of my father, who was suffering from kidney ailments. Eventually, he passed away. There are around 16 doctors in our family, so I decided to follow my friends advice. It was an impromptu decision. Later, managing my job with studies became overwhelming, so I decided to quit and focus on preparing for the exam," Dr Sangram tells The Better India.

In 2015, became an IPS officer and took charge as Superintendent of Police in Mulugu and Jayashankar-Bhupalpally districts of Telangana. However, little did he know that his expertise in medicine, combined with his position as an officer, would help him cater to the health needs of tribals, who had otherwise not accessed medical care for years.

Since 2019, Dr Sangram has helped over 5,000 Gotti Koya tribals from 100-odd hamlets in the district, address various complaints including those of nutrition deficiency, haemoglobin, skin, and other related ailments. With the help of this officer, medicinal help worth Rs 7 lakh has reached the tribals so far.

Dr Sangram says the initiative to help the tribal community began after he noticed poor health conditions and a lack of medical support in the area. “As a part of routine patrolling, police officials are required to move around these remote parts of the district. The agency areas where these vulnerable communities live are non-accessible by vehicles and sometimes require walking for miles,” he says.

The 36-year-old adds that it was during such visits and interactions with locals that he realised the pain they were in. “As a medical professional, I could understand their health issues well,” he says.

He roped in doctors from the Indian Medical Association, Warangal and health officers from the government district hospital and health centre for the cause. Along with Dr Sangram, around 20 such doctors systematically reached out to hamlets.

Explaining the function of medical camps, which help screen villagers and identify health issues, Dr Sangram says, “The patients are immediately treated and provided with medicines if needed. Those requiring advanced care are directed to the district hospital. The women and children are more susceptible to diseases, and various tests are held for accurate diagnosis,” he adds. He says no fee is charged to the villagers for treatment.

## 13. For 26 Years, This Woman Has Been Helping Nilgiris Tribals Stand For Their Rights

Thanks to their consistent efforts, tribal communities today have formed independent groups for producing several natural goods- especially honey and beeswax.

After dedicating 26 years to creating a harmonious balance between nature, humans and technology, social worker Snehlata Nath, still feels that it is just the beginning.

Recipient of the prestigious Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Application of Science and Technology for Rural Development in 2013, she has been extensively working in the field of eco-development, livelihood, and sustainability in rural tribal areas of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

The heart of her efforts lies in marrying their indigenous knowledge, culture, and practices with modern technology – achieving sustainable development.

Snehlata shares that her motivation to work in the sector was not a sudden realization, but a steady goal which matured over the years as she pursued higher education in Lucknow and Delhi.

“There isn’t a specific incident, but a series of them, which influenced me to work in the development sector. So instead of conventional professions, I chose to join an NGO in Delhi,” she said, speaking to The Better India.

However, after working for several years in the capital, she, along with a group of experts, decided to do more work at the grassroots level.

“We didn’t want to stay in Delhi and operate remotely. So we formed Keystone Foundation in 1993, which would venture in grounded eco-development and rural management.

The Nilgiris was chosen as the focus area due to the abject poverty and remoteness that these tribes face, from the rest of the world,” added the 53-year-old Snehlata.

Their organisation focuses on the core aspects of ecology and economy, which includes developing appropriate technology for the mountains, preserving and enhancing the biodiversity and indigenous communities, forests, their livelihoods, and culture.

And by doing so, they created the possibility of green enterprises and environmental governance in these remote regions.

Many need-based technologies – that blend the traditional and modern – have been able to ease the problems of the villagers by helping them to produce good quality and value-added agricultural and forests produce, and have also ushered a sense of independent entrepreneurship among them.

“Their knowledge about their natural surroundings, the forests, the land, water is vast and precious which needed a proper direction.

These communities were completely cut-off from the rest of the world, and we wanted to bridge that gap without intruding or harming their lifestyle.

So, in addition to introducing better technology to aid the production of indigenous agricultural and forest produce, we also wanted to promote employment locally and increase opportunity for labour, to stop migration to urban areas," said Snehlata.

Thanks to their consistent efforts, tribal communities today have formed independent groups for producing several natural goods- especially honey and beeswax. "At a time when development and growth in India are being projected worldwide, I want to appeal to all to keep the needs of the rural communities in mind. These are communities for whom forests and water is of primary importance, not only for their livelihood but also for their culture, and so it is important to use sensitive development procedures for truly empowering them," she added.

**14. Sadguru Foundation: Providing Economic Freedom to Tribals**

India's Census 2001 classified 84.33 million persons as members of Scheduled Tribes. With almost 10% of our population as belonging to tribal groups, their interests must be matched with national and economic interests of India as a whole. Since time immemorial, tribals have been victims of abject poverty, with their livelihood depending solely on agriculture and allied activities. About 66.84% of India's tribal population is engaged in agriculture. With most such families relying on natural resources for their livelihood, any threat to the environment has the potential of destabilising their lives too.

The foundation nurtured a vision of helping tribal people break away from their circles of poverty and unemployment, so as to include them in the mainstream economic activity of India.

Recognizing a concern for natural resources and their importance in preserving the lives of India's indigenous peoples, Navinchandra Mafatlal Sadguru Water Development Foundation was established as a non-governmental organization in 1974. The foundation nurtured a vision of helping tribal people break away from their circles of poverty and unemployment, so as to include them in the mainstream economic activity of India.

The approach used was to restore lost natural resources. Their website notes, "Not so long ago, Dahod situated in Western India was covered with thick dense forests – a home for wild tigers and elephants. The tribals of the region earned their livelihood from the forests. For the last fifty years there has been immense natural resource destruction and inappropriate management leading to loss of biological diversity. The organization Sadguru Water Development Foundation, an NGO, established in 1974, dedicated itself to the betterment of rural and tribal people by helping them make better use of available resources, appropriate technology and participatory managerial practices."

They have many programmes centred on the environment such as 'community water resource development', 'participatory micro watershed development' and 'environment and forestry'.

**Humble beginnings**

Often, a single small step can lead to beginnings of a great revolution. Similar was the journey of Sadguru foundation. **Mr. Harnath Jagawat**, Trustee and Director, N.M. Sadguru Water and Development Foundation, who has been working in the field of rural development and tribal development for last 38 years, writes, "For first two years, it was one person with one in all functions, combining Chief Executive, typist, clerk, driver, peon, everything.

Till we reached the staff strength of four, we had only one table shared by four persons sitting on four sides of a common table, placed in one room office of 10 X 15 feet area. Purchasing a simple cheap chair of Rs. 20/- would require lot of thinking and readjusting the budget as it was paltry sum of about Rs. 25,000/- per year which was available from Mafatlals to that all-in-one functionary."

How then, did the organisation reach where it is today? He explains, "1990 was an important turning point with the substantial foreign funds matched by the Government funds paved a way for scaling up of the activities. The scaling up was very successful. With this success, which also proved our enhanced capability, more funds were mobilised from the foreign funding agencies.

Our tough and rough infancy period full of turmoil, made us tougher to accept any challenge and it also taught us that when the opportunity was offered, it had to be grabbed. What was once started, as an insignificant, modest experiment has been now acknowledged as a viable, relevant and replicable important model in the tribal development, with a prospect to spread in the entire tribal region of our country."

The impact of such a movement is clear from its achievements in the past one year. **42,71,626 saplings** have been planted within one year, under the agro forestry and horticulture species, the highest ever plantation by the organization since they started this activity from the year 1982. **33 hamlet-cum-house hold based drinking water systems** have been established. First time in the backward district of Dahod, the tribal households could get house hold drinking water connections with almost 24 hours water supply. While in the cities, we tend to take such bare minimum necessities of life for granted, those who have the courage and the motivation to reach out to areas devoid of such facilities deserve noteworthy credit.

## 15. Baker's Classes Earn Rs 10L Turnover While Taking Assam's Tribal Cuisine To The World

Mitali Gogoi Dutta began her journey with a few lessons in baking from her home and today gives online classes, conducts several projects to promote local Assamese cuisine, and empowers the tribal community.

When Mitali Gogoi Dutta, a resident of Guwahati, was asked by a friend if she could teach her the basics of baking, she had no idea this would catapult her into launching culinary classes one day. After all, the former ground staff for an airline, who also holds a degree in physiotherapy, had left her professional life behind in the early 2010s to become a full-time stay-at-home mom for her two daughters.

But when her friend made the request in 2015, Mitali agreed, and as one thing led to another, a few months later, her house no longer had the space to accommodate the ever-growing number of students who wished to learn the delicate art of cooking from her.

To keep up with the growing demand, she invested a sum of Rs 8,000 to rent a small space and purchase kitchen ingredients and vessels. Since then, her culinary venture, 'Food Sutra' by Mitali (FSM) has grown multifold — in fact, last year, the company recorded a monthly turnover of Rs 10,00,000.

But the 35-year-old’s culinary skills aren’t just helping her earn big profits; Mitali is also empowering tribal women living near Kaziranga and Manas National Park in Assam. Through her new initiative ‘FSM Food Trails’, she aims to boost food tourism in the region through local cuisine.

Within six years since she first started, Mitali has been able to create her name as a culinary entrepreneur in not just Guwahati, but across India. Between 2020 and 2021, she was able to teach 3,000 students online.

“It was a combination of strategies and careful planning that helped me reach where I am today,” Mitali tells **The Better India**.

She adds, “As far as my knowledge goes, I started teaching baking when no one else was doing it. Additionally, I train my students in a way that they can commercialise their own baking initiatives. Some of my students are now running profitable food ventures of their own.”

**Baking to culinary tours**

For the first two years, Mitali popularised her culinary training solely through word of mouth. In 2017, she became more active on social media.

“I was surprised to see the number of women who were eager to learn baking and start their own businesses. I wanted to help them learn how to go about it, so that they wouldn’t have to wait long before profits started coming in. I polished my existing skills by training under professional chefs to provide a wholesome course,” says Mitali.

The students are offered three courses, each with different difficulty levels. The first course is priced at Rs 1,000 and lasts for five days. In the last session, Miltali introduces the next course, which is more advanced. She follows the same method after the students finish the second course and pitches the third one, which lasts three months.

“All the courses are outcome-oriented with chapters such as digital marketing, accounting, packaging and more. I even provide certificates to advanced learners, which helps them establish credibility,” she adds.

Mitali says scaling her venture and investing money was a calculated risk. She had taken surveys among her students, friends and family to affirm that the demand for cakes and other baked products will never end.

The 3,000 students that have taken lessons from Mitali belong to different parts of Northeast India. Meanwhile, travellers who have experienced her Culinary Tours came from Sri Lanka, Netherlands, Belgium, Brazil and the United States.

Thanks to her community of over 35,000 followers across different social media platforms, Mitali has been able to gauge people's attention on the cooking heritage of Assam in tribal regions.

It all began when she got the chance to feature on Chef Kunal Kapur's *Utsav Thalis of India* series. Her followers suggested her name on social media when the showmakers started hunting for a chef in the Northeast.

The episode caught the attention of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 2017, who approached her to curate an unforgettable culinary experience for domestic and international tourists in Kaziranga National Park. This would serve the twin purpose of introducing alternative livelihoods for poachers and popularising the local culture.

The forest department and WWF extended technical and financial help to Mitali, who in turn trained the locals in food presentation, guest hospitality, and safe ways of cooking.

"Some of the locals are amazing cooks, so I decided not to change, add or delete anything from their style of cooking or the ingredients. All they needed was a little bit of presentation work and capacity building. We prepared a special menu that would reflect the local culture and habits," says Mitali.

For example, the tribals are very close to nature and prefer using sustainable ways, she notes. So the entire experience is kept plastic free and one which does not generate non-biodegradable waste.

"We have dishes like *Pha-ok pen kimung* (pork cooked in bamboo tubes), *Go-ok pen Kemung* (chicken cooked in bamboo tubes) and *Pha-ok pen hanserong* (pork cooked in roselle leaves), that perfectly embody the traditions of people of Karbi village. In ancient times, the community would mix pork-based dishes with medicinal herbs found in forests to boost immunity for farming. Instead of conventional spices and oil, they use sesame seed powder," Mitali explains.

Close to 30 women and men from the tribal community have been hosting domestic and foreign tourists and earning upto Rs 2,000 per tourist, she adds.

Impressed by Mitali's culinary tourism project, WWF asked her to replicate a similar model in Manas National Park, where the rhino population was almost extinct.

"The community suffered extensively during the Bodoland dispute for over 20 years. The villagers took to poaching to survive and close to hundred rhinos were killed. As part of the rhino conservation, forest authorities and WWF worked to turn poachers into protectors and this food experience is a part of that," says Mitali, who trained 60 locals in Manas.

"Here again, we highlighted dishes that are prepared in unique ways, like pork meat, which is served with roselle and dry jute leaves. It is 10 times more bitter than usual pork. Another meat dish is prepared with rice flour. Initially we were hesitant to keep the rate at Rs 500 per dish, given that it is prepared within Rs 100 as all the ingredients are sourced locally. But tourists were more than willing to pay more. In fact, some even gave more than the decided rates after seeing the cooking process," she adds.

Shantina Basumatary, a chef from Barangabari village who is part of Mitali's initiative, told Tehelka, "Earlier, I used to depend on the forest as well as fishing for survival. Now, we are earning through these initiatives, which are of great help to my family of four members."

Meanwhile, Mitali says that not only is there a stable livelihood for locals near the two national parks, but the mindset has also changed. For the first time, they are realising the role a cuisine can play in conserving a region's heritage.

From giving rise to at-home bakers in urban areas to empowering the rural folks, Mitali is leaving no stone unturned in putting Assam's cuisine on the world map. In fact, she is a cohort of the Academy of Women Entrepreneurs under the US Consulate and Asian Confluence for mentorship to expand her reach globally.

On this International Women's Day (March 8), she was felicitated by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship as a women entrepreneur driving impactful change.

## 16. Sighting vax team signals Odisha tribals to run into forests

**Fear of the unknown, misinformation-fuelled anxiety, lack of trust, a cautious local community and a paucity of awareness campaigns mar vaccination efforts in the remote tribal villages of Odisha**

Orda, a tribal village under Gobara panchayat in Cuttack district is untraceable on any digital device. Neither Google Maps nor any other search engine could tell you where exactly the village is. Last month, when a health department team reached Orda to inoculate the villagers, many fled into the bordering forests to avoid the Covid-19 vaccination doses.

Fear of the unknown, misinformation-fuelled anxiety, lack of trust, a cautious local community and a paucity of effective awareness campaigns mar vaccination efforts in the remote tribal villages of Odisha, as in many other parts of the country.

Most members of the local community here are now opposed to the mass vaccination drive. They are apprehensive about the government's medical intervention in an otherwise healthy community.

"We have seen in the past that several healthy people when given injections became sick and some have even died. We do not have any faith in injections when most of us are quite healthy and without any disease," said Kundia Hembram, a tribal from Orda.

"Recently we saw a man from our village that took some injection and died after that. We do not want to invite trouble by taking the injection," Singha Sundi, another villager told 101Reporters during our visit there.

Spending some time with villagers reveals how unexposed they are to the world outside their hamlet. This, in turn, contributes to the overall lack of trust and increases fear among the locals. The village is still not connected with a proper road and is easily cut-off during monsoons, making travel difficult even on a two-wheeler. The nearest health centre, Gurudijhatia Primary Health Centre, is around 12 km away from the village.

There are several other tribal-dominated areas like Orda that face similar challenges. Here rumours about COVID-19 and its prevention spread faster than authentic information. Pangapada in Tumudibandh Block of Kandhamal district is another such remote tribal village. There is barely any mobile network coverage and the lack of good roads adds to the villagers' woes.

Surath Patmajhi, who is a youth from the Dongria Kondh tribe in the village, has been vaccinated after being persuaded by some voluntary organisations. But the majority of the population of Pangapada remain elusive. He attributed this to several rumours doing the rounds in the village that are influencing villagers against vaccination. It is important to note that Dongria Kondh is among the thirteen Primarily Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

"There are around 30 households in my village but till now not more than 10 persons have taken the vaccine. There are several myths in my community regarding the covid vaccines. They believe that these injections could make them sick; it could be used as a birth control measure and may make them infertile; while some also think that this could be a means to eradicate the tribal communities," said Surath. He also added that there had been very few attempts by the government to create awareness about the vaccines among the local community.

A few voluntary organisations are trying to bridge the communication gap through the mobilisation of local communities. Many of the organisations claim that the remoteness of these villages, the lack of telecom connectivity and the dearth of proper, accessible roads pose insurmountable challenges that prevent conventional media and government outreach programmes from helping these villages.

According to a written statement provided by the Ministry of Communication before Lok Sabha in the last Budget Session (March 2021), Odisha hosts a maximum of 6,099 villages with no mobile connectivity which is around 24 per cent of the not connected villages of India.

"In tribal areas, the local community is more likely to believe their local leaders than the outsiders. There is a huge digital divide. Unlike urban areas or well-connected villages, these villagers are not exposed to the best practices. However, they continue to be under threat as many of them come to weekly haats or markets but many do not follow covid-appropriate behaviour," said Ruchika Kashyap, Executive Trustee of Atmashakti Trust, who is working in tribal areas of Raygada and Malkangiri to create awareness among the local communities. She also said that the condition of women and differently-abled people are more worrisome in tribal communities as they do not have a voice in the decision-making process of the village.

Y Giri Rao, a tribal livelihood expert from Vasundhara, Bhubaneswar, said that the way the vaccination drive was initially undertaken, rendered the whole exercise futile.

"The tribal communities in the state are very simple and isolated and not exposed to the ideas and experiments on the covid front. They hardly see people with PPE kits, masks, gloves and other protective gear except in hospitals. The visits of health teams wearing such attire, without taking the local people in confidence first, led to opposition and reluctance among the community and affected the vaccination drive," he told 101Reporters.

Vaccination in tribal areas across the state ran into several operational hiccups due to the shortage of vaccines and the indiscriminate and innumerable closure of drives in several districts. Tribal areas remained the worst-affected as the closures were compounded by vaccine hesitancy and opposition from the community. Moreover, these areas had the least teledensity, smartphone penetration and lack of literacy making it harder for communities to register the fast-dwindling slots online.

Experts also claimed that in several tribal villages, different members of the households often visit forests to collect forest produce or for farming, and unscheduled visits by health teams in such areas have failed to evoke a good response. Some also suggested creative means of communication like skits and folk arts to win the trust of the communities and spread the message.

Gautam Mohanty, Programme Officer at Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihood Programme (OTELP), which was the nodal agency responsible for vaccinating PVTGs, said that at least 20,346 members of the PVTGs above the age of 45 years have been vaccinated till now and a total of 2,342 persons in the 18-44 age group have also been vaccinated.

Mohanty said that although OTELP and the health department faced several challenges, it has worked on special plans to counter them.

"The situation was challenging initially, where we saw many people fleeing to forest areas in tribal villages to avoid vaccination but this has changed and we are proving successful now. We started taking the local leaders and volunteers from such areas into confidence and used them to create awareness in their own language and local beliefs."

Mohanty also said that village-to-village awareness campaigns with microphones, incentives to visit quarantine centres, special covid-kits for the villagers, etc. helped them to garner their support and that the situation is likely to improve soon.

## 17. After Helping Treat 1 Lakh Tribals; Doctor Couple Now Empowers Them Through Craft

“With healthcare off to a good start, our next goal was to help the women revive their traditional craft of Lambadi embroidery. That was the beginning of the Porgai Artisans Association.”

When Dr M Regi and Dr Lalitha Reji, a doctor couple hailing from Kerala, decided to backpack across the country for a year to document the most sensitive areas desperately in need of medical help, they encountered the unique Lambadi community, a nomadic tribe living in Sittilingi in Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu.

Residing near the foothills of the Kalrayan and Sitteri hill ranges, this remote tribal community was cut off from the rest of the modern world.

They are called the ‘Malavasis’ or ‘Hill People’ who found their living through rain-fed agriculture.

The doctor couple was shocked and troubled at the sheer lack of healthcare facilities in the area. During times of any medical emergency, these people would travel to Salem or to Dharmapurimore than 50 KM away.

That’s when they decided to stay and make affordable healthcare available to Sittilingi’s two lakh people and give them a source of livelihood to live a life of dignity and earn recognition for their traditional craft.

**Bringing Relief to the Lambadi Tribals**

After completing their medical training, Dr M Regi and Dr Lalitha Reji stated working in a hospital in Gandhigram where they encountered people who had travelled miles for the treatment of preventable illnesses like diarrhoea and childhood pneumonia.

Rattled by the lack of healthcare access, the couple decided to delve into the country’s primary healthcare setup by visiting many villages and taluks. This is when they came across the community of Lambadi tribals.

What pushed the couple further to help bring relief to these people was the fact that this hamlet recorded an Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) of 150 per 1,000 babies, the highest in all of India!

It has been 25 years now and the couple is still moving forward with their project, Tribal Health Initiative (THI).

“We had no money to buy land, so we set up a small clinic on government land, nothing more than a small hut built by the tribals. We worked out of this hut for three years, conducting deliveries and minor surgeries on the floor,” informs Dr Regi

Today, the duo has come a long way from the thatched hut to a 35-bed full-fledged hospital, equipped with an ICU and ventilator, a dental clinic, a labour room, a neonatal room, an emergency room, a fully functional laboratory, a modern operation theatre and other facilities like X-Ray, Ultrasound, endoscopy, and echocardiography, like any other modern hospital.

Due to their incessant efforts, the IMR in Sittilingi has now reduced to 20 per 1,000, one of the lowest in India.

**The Beginning Of 'Porgai'**

But the doctor duo didn't stop at that.The couple decided to venture into preserving the history and cultural heritage of the tribe by reviving the dying art of Lambadi embroidery."With healthcare off to a good start, our next goal was to help the women revive their traditional craft of Lambadi embroidery. That was the beginning of the Porgai Artisans Association.

This unique embroidery art form is an amalgamation of pattern darning, mirror work, cross-stitch, overlaid and quilting stitches with borders of *'Kangura'* patchwork done on loosely-woven dark blue or red handloom base fabric.

Often mistaken as Kutchi (Kachhi) embroidery because of the mirror work, the shells and coins are unique to this type of embroidery, with the stitches being different.

'Porgai', which stands for 'pride' in the Lambadi dialect represents self-sufficiency and independence for the farmers, artisans and the community as a whole.

"We had a rich tradition of hand embroidery which our ancestors did on the clothing and other day to day articles. In course of time, when we stopped wearing the traditional dress, the craft was lost for more than two generations," says Neela, a part of the community.

"A majority of Porgai's products are made from organic cotton grown in our own villages. This cotton, untrammelled by pesticides and unpolluted by chemical fertilisers is then hand-spun, hand-woven and dyed with natural dyes by cooperatives," explains Dr Reji.

"Whether it is subtly embroidered Kurti or a cushion cover brightly emblazoned with traditional Lambadi designs when you buy a Porgai product, you are bringing home a world that values human passion and individual skill," explains Reji.

Porgai products have also drawn students from fashion designing schools as well. At least half-a-dozen interns from Bengaluru, Delhi and Mumbai have worked with the tribal women, helping them retain the ethnic embroidery work while trying to improvise on the design aspect and make them trendy.

Dr Regi observes, "Just building and running a hospital isn't enough. Whether it is eating healthy chemical-free food by adopting organic farming or promoting entrepreneurship among women, the key to a healthy community is dependent on upliftment in different fields."

## 18. Nomadic tribal group gets Aadhaar

**Kattupaniya members were deprived of Govt. incentives, including free ration, during pandemic**

Members of Kattupaniya, a nomadic tribal group that was rehabilitated from caves near the South Wayanad-Nilambur Forest Division a few years ago, have enrolled for Aadhaar cards on the intervention of the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA).

As many as 33 members of the vulnerable tribal group had been rehabilitated from the Nilambur forest at Erattakkundu Colony near Attamala seven years ago. However, details of 20 members have not been entered in Government records. District Sub Judge K. Rajesh, who is also the secretary of DLSA, Wayanad, visited the tribal hamlet a few weeks ago as part of the Pan India Legal Awareness and Outreach Campaign of the National Legal Services Authority. During the visit, Mr. Rajesh was told that the tribal group had been deprived of Government incentives, including free ration during the pandemic.

As many as 18 children, who were born in the hamlet, do not have birth certificates, as their mothers were not admitted to hospitals for delivery.

In the absence of birth certificates, Aadhaar cards could not be issued to them, Mr. Rajesh told *The Hindu* . Since members of the Kattupaniya tribe usually do not mingle with the public, they rush back to the nearby forest if an outsider turns up in the hamlet. Hence, Aadhaar seeding could not be done for a majority of them.

“Later, we decided to organise a camp in the hamlet to issue Aadhaar cards and other documents like ration cards and bank accounts with the support of the district administration, Tribal Development Department, Akshaya centre at Thinapuram, and officials of the Vellarimala branch of the Kerala Grameen Bank,” he said.

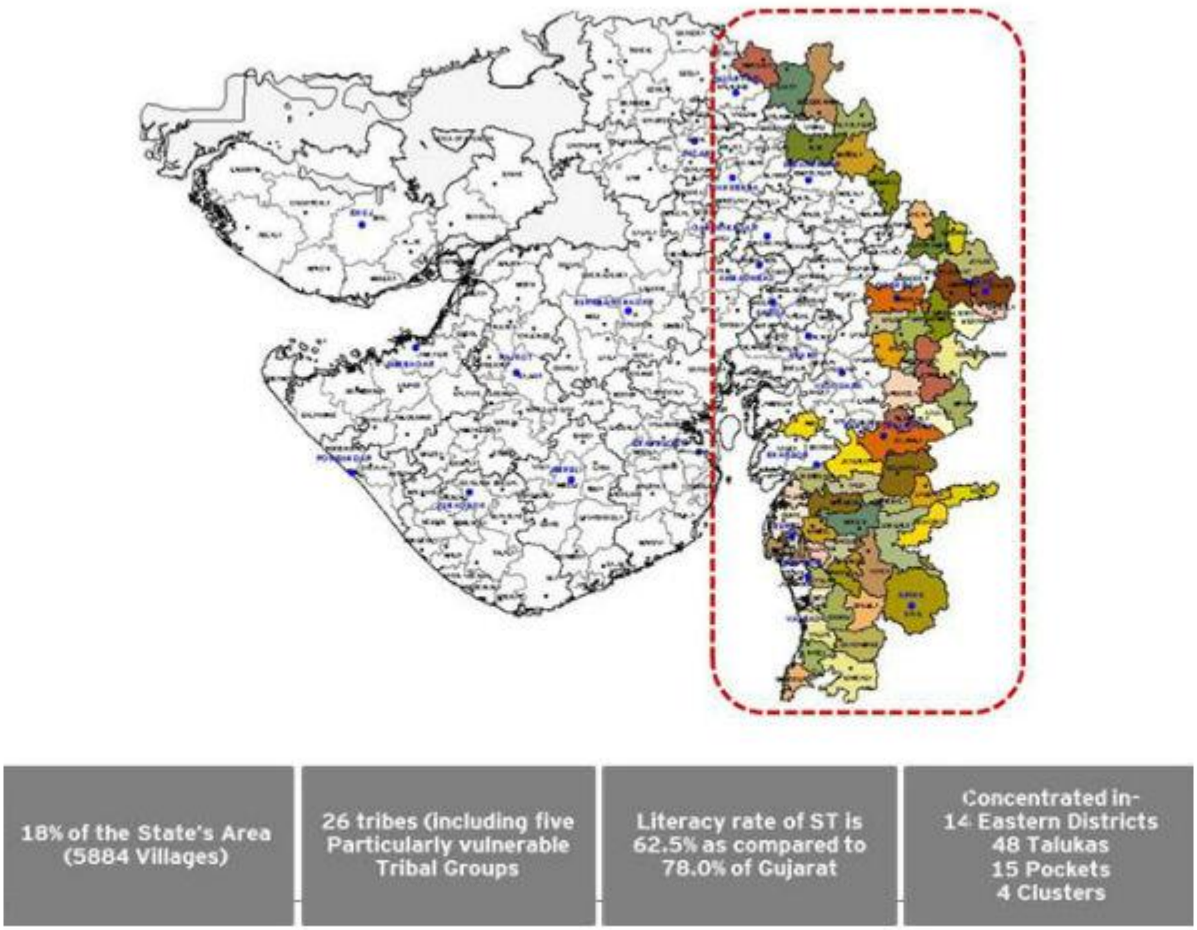
Though Aadhaar seeding was done for 14 persons, six left for the nearby forest owing to the presence of outsiders. Bank accounts were opened for 14 persons.

Though the Tribal Development Department had constructed three concrete houses for members of the group, they still live in make-shift huts attached to the houses, Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) officer K.C. Cheriyan said.

**About Kattupaniya Tribal group** - Kattupaniya is a **nomadic tribal group** who live in the forested hills of Malappuram’s Nilambur taluk and the bordering **Thamarassery forest area of Kozhikode’s district**.

The members of the Kattupaniya tribe **usually do not mingle with the public** and they rush back to the nearby forest if an outsider turns up in the hamlet. They live in **make-shift huts** attached to the houses.

## 19. PM launches new projects in tribal districts of Gujarat




Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday inaugurated projects worth over 20,000 crore, including a locomotive manufacturing unit, in Gujarat's tribal belt Dahod and Panchmahal.

He laid the foundation stone for a project to manufacture 9,000 Horsepower (HP) electric locomotives in Dahod district. He said it was his dream to make the district an important centre for Make in India.

He addressed a huge gathering of tribals in central Gujarat, ahead of the Assembly polls slated for later this year.

“Projects worth more than 22,000 crore for Dahod & Panchmahal have been inaugurated today. One of them is a scheme related to drinking water. There are many projects related to making Dahod a smart city. Dahod is now going to become a big centre for Make In India,” he said.

Talking about the locomotive unit, he said the colonial era steam locomotives workshop would now be an impetus for Make In India. “It was my dream after becoming Prime Minister to see Dahod get such an important project,” he said.

“India is now one of the few countries that make powerful 9,000 horsepower locomotives. This new factory in Dahod will provide employment to thousands of youth and increase industrialisation in the entire area,” he added.

According to the details shared by the Railways, the refurbished workshop would manufacture broad gauge electric locomotives for Indian Railways and standard gauge electric locomotives for the export market.

In his speech, Mr. Modi reminded his audience that tribals from central Gujarat fought colonial rulers during the British rule. He said new science and medical colleges would be set up in tribal districts so that local boys and girls could study science and medicine.

He also narrated stories from his early life and mentioned how his work in tribal districts influenced him.

Gujarat accounts for 8.1% of the Scheduled Tribe population of the country. The tribal population of Gujarat, numbering 89.17 lakh, constitute 14.8% of the state’s population. They are concentrated in the eastern districts, from Mt. Abu on the Rajasthan border in the north to Dahanu district on the Maharashtra border in the south.

The TSP area constitutes 18% of the state’s geographical area. There are 11 major tribes in Gujarat; the largest Bhil, constituting 47.89% of the state’s tribal population. The 5 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups number about 1,44,593 (as per Census 2011).

As per the 2011 census, the effective literacy rate is 62.5% in ST population, which is 14.8% higher than that of 2001. The most impressive improvement can be noted in the female literacy rate which improved by 17.2%. The literacy gap reduced from 21% to around 15% in a short span of time.