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PHYSICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Complex human childbirth and cognitive abilities a result of walking upright



Childbirth in humans is much more complex and painful than in great apes. It was long believed that this was a result of humans' larger brains and the narrow dimensions of the mother's pelvis. Researchers have now used 3D simulations to show that childbirth was also a highly complex process in early hominins that gave birth to relatively small-brained newborns -- with important implications for their cognitive development.

Dilemma between walking upright and larger brains

Bipedalism developed around seven million years ago and dramatically reshaped the hominin pelvis into a real birth canal. Larger brains, however, didn't start to develop until two million years ago, when the earliest species of the genus *Homo* emerged. The evolutionary solution to the dilemma brought about by these two conflicting evolutionary forces was to give birth to neurologically immature and helpless newborns with relatively small brains -- a condition known as secondary altriciality.

Prolonged learning key for cognitive and cultural abilities

The findings indicate that australopithecines are likely to have practiced a form of cooperative breeding, even before the genus *Homo* appeared. Compared to great apes, the brains developed for longer outside the uterus, enabling infants to learn from other members of the group. "This prolonged

period of learning is generally considered crucial for the cognitive and cultural development of humans," Häusler says. This conclusion is also supported by the earliest documented stone tools, which date back to 3.3 million years ago -- long before the genus Homo appeared.

2. The cavemen within: Did love, not war, bring an end to Neanderthals?

Scientists believe humans and Neanderthals merged in Europe to become one new species. There's always been a suspicion that our ancestors pushed Neanderthals to extinction. The scenario is that modern humans migrated out of Africa and slaughtered or stole hunting grounds from Neanderthals, wiping out our closest relatives about 40,000 years ago. Another explanation is offered by Prof Svante Pääbo, a Swedish scientist who sequenced the first Neanderthal genome, using DNA extracted from bones found in a Croatian cave. He believes Neanderthals mixed with modern humans until they dissolved into us. Neanderthals left Africa about 300,000 years ago and thrived in Europe. Then, about 130,000 years ago, modern humans left Africa and colonised Europe, meeting the Neanderthals.

What likely followed was infrequent mixing of modern humans and Neanderthals to give rise to hybrid children, Pääbo says. This would explain a remarkable finding from his lab at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany; about 2 per cent of our DNA came directly from Neanderthals. Disappeared "The reason Neanderthals disappeared might simply be because they were absorbed into larger modern human populations," Pääbo adds.

"Everyone outside of Africa carries traces of Neanderthal DNA." This includes people in parts of the world where we know Neanderthals never set foot. It seems that modern humans came out of Africa and met Neanderthals. Where they met, they mated. This view of love, not slaughter, has gained support. "There was a relatively long period of overlap between Neanderthals and humans in both the Middle East and Europe," says Prof Rasmus Nielsen, a computational geneticist at the University of California, Berkeley, who flags 40,000 to 65,000 years ago as a key time period.

"There seemed to be a steady increase in the amounts of humans and a steady decline in Neanderthals." He estimates there may have been 10 times as many humans as Neanderthals. "The genetics suggests that humans and Neanderthals

admixed proportionally to their population sizes and essentially merged to become one new species,” says Nielsen. However, because the Neanderthals had a smaller population and more inbreeding, natural selection has chiselled away at their DNA contribution since this merger, Nielsen adds, reducing it from 10 per cent at the start to 2 per cent now. “Many of us carry fragments of Neanderthal DNA in our chromosomes,” notes Pääbo. One flavour of a gene puts some of us at risk of Type II diabetes. One in four Asian people carry it. This came to us from Neanderthals, Pääbo explains. “Today it gives us diabetes, but it was probably advantageous when we had periods of starvation.” Pääbo says human genetic studies also turn up gene variants that seem to protect us against diseases and that seem to have come from our Neanderthal ancestors. In fact, Neanderthal DNA might have even helped us survive flu pandemics, one study suggests.

A fragment of Neanderthal thigh bone shows cutmarks left by the sharp edge of a flint stone tool, similar to the one in this image. A discovery of hybrid children of Neanderthals and another form of human (see panel), among just a handful of ancient bones, suggests mixing of humans was common enough. More evidence of interbreeding comes from a modern human who lived about 40,000 years ago in what is now Romania, whose DNA shows he had a Neanderthal in his family tree. Pääbo – who wrote about his research in *Neanderthal Man: In Search of Lost Genomes* (2014) – says perhaps half of Neanderthal DNA still exists today, spread out among ourselves.

These other humans, Denisovans, also contributed some genes to modern humans. There is one flavour of a gene (EPAS1) found at unusually high frequencies in Tibetan people who live at very high altitude, where there is less oxygen in the air. “This had already been known about,” says Pääbo, “but it turns out that this came from the Denisovans,” who appeared to be well adapted to colder climes. This EPAS1 gene variant improves the transport of oxygen in blood. Our ancestors’ genetics is revealing, mixed readily with other humans and we still carry their DNA. “Hominin species may not evolve as an evolutionary tree with branches that split up from each other and then occasionally go extinct,” says Nielsen. “Rather species diverge and then merge again.” The diversity of our human past is key to our success as a species, he points out – Neanderthals are not entirely gone.

3. 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.

4. If You're A Woman, Having Neanderthal Gene Could Be Great. Here's Why

Why some women face a higher risk during childbirth and why some go into labor for longer durations compared to others still remain a mystery. And while some women have no problem conceiving quickly, others might be struggling to get pregnant for so many years. The clue might lie in a gene inherited from the Neanderthals, according to a recent study. A progesterone receptor inherited from the Neanderthals is associated with increased fertility, fewer miscarriages,

and fewer bleeding during pregnancy reported the Researchers at the Max Plank Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany and Karolinska Institutet in Sweden.

Neanderthals are an extinct species of archaic human beings from Eurasia who lived there about 40,000 years ago. These archaic humans emerged at least 200,000 years ago during the Pleistocene Epoch. Compared to modern humans, they had a more robust build and possessed proportionally shorter limbs. Progesterone, a steroid sex hormone secreted by the ovaries, adrenal glands, and the placenta, is involved in the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, libido, and embryogenesis. The progesterone receptor is encoded by the gene 'PGR' located on chromosome 11 and is expressed in the endometrium.

Progesterone levels are elevated throughout pregnancy and play a vital role in keeping the fetus viable until delivery. Women with low levels of progesterone during pregnancy might suffer from miscarriages. There is also a possibility of bleeding during the first trimester. "We show that two Neandertal haplotypes carrying the PGR gene entered the modern human population and that present-day carriers of the Neandertal haplotypes express higher levels of the receptor.

In a cohort of present-day Britons, these carriers have more siblings, fewer miscarriages, and less bleeding during early pregnancy suggesting that the Neandertal progesterone receptor alleles promote fertility. This may explain their high frequency in modern human populations," said the researchers in their paper published in *Molecular Biology and Evolution*. The researchers analyzed data from the U.K. biobank using the Gene ATLAS tool. Out of the 450,000 participants, 244,000 were women. Key findings: One in three women in Europe possessed the progesterone receptor. 29% carry one copy of the Neanderthal receptor and 3% carry two copies. Women with the gene variant had fewer miscarriages, gave birth to more children, and became pregnant more frequently experienced fewer bleeding compared to others. The progesterone receptor protected women against bleeding and miscarriages since they provided increased sensitivity to progesterone.

5. Homo heidelbergensis was Extremely Resourceful, New Research Shows

New research pieces together the activities and movements of a group of *Homo heidelbergensis*, a poorly understood species of archaic humans that lived between 700,000 to 200,000 years ago, as they made tools, including the oldest bone tools documented in Europe, and extensively butchered a large horse at the

480,000-year old archaeological site near Boxgrove, Sussex, the United Kingdom. The Horse Butchery Site is one of many excavated in quarries near Boxgrove, an internationally significant area that is home to Britain's oldest human remains. During the excavations in the 1980-90s, archaeologists recovered more than 2,000 razor sharp flint fragments from eight separate groupings, known as knapping scatters.

These are places where individual early humans knelt to make their tools and left behind a dense concentration of material between their knees. Embarking on an ambitious jigsaw puzzle to piece together the individual flints, Dr. Matthew Pope from the Institute of Archaeology at University College London and his colleagues discovered that in every case *Homo heidelbergensis* were making large flint knives called bifaces, often described as the perfect butcher's tool. "This was an exceptionally rare opportunity to examine a site pretty much as it had been left behind by an extinct population, after they had gathered to totally process the carcass of a dead horse on the edge of a coastal marshland," Dr. Pope said.

"Incredibly, we've been able to get as close as we can to witnessing the minute-by-minute movement and behaviors of a single apparently tight-knit group of early humans: a community of people, young and old, working together in a cooperative and highly social way." "We established early on that there were at least eight individuals at the site making tools, and considered it likely that a small group of adults, a 'hunting party,' could have been responsible for the butchery," he said.

"However, we were astonished to see traces of other activities and movement across the site, which opened the possibility of a much larger group being present." The detailed study of the horse bones shows the animal was not just stripped of meat, but each bone was broken down using stone hammers so that the marrow and liquid grease could be sucked out. The horse appears to have been completely processed, with the fat, marrow, internal organs and even the partially digested stomach contents providing a nutritious meal for the early human group of 30 or 40 individuals envisaged for the site.

However, the horse provided more than just food, and the detailed analysis of the bones found that several bones had been used as tools called retouchers. "These are some of the earliest non-stone tools found in the archaeological record of human evolution," said Simon Parfitt, also from the Institute of Archaeology at University College London. "They would have been essential for

manufacturing the finely made flint knives found in the wider Boxgrove landscape." "The finding provides evidence that early human cultures understood the properties of different organic materials and how tools could be made to improve the manufacture of other tools," said Dr. Silvia Bello, a researcher at the Natural History Museum, London.

"Along with the careful butchery of the horse and the complex social interaction hinted at by the stone refitting patterns, it provides further evidence that early human population at Boxgrove were cognitively, social and culturally sophisticated." Cooperative activity amongst larger numbers of people suggests these temporary sites could have been highly social spaces for interaction, learning and the sharing of tools and ideas. The Horse Butchery Site shows this behavior more vividly than any other site so far discovered in the archaeological record.

SOCIO – CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. MP district becomes first in India to be fully functionally literate : Why modern society needs functional literacy even more

A Madhya Pradesh district has become the first in India to achieve full functional literacy, but the decades-old definition needs to pave the way for a modern interpretation for a functional 21st century society.

A tribal-dominated district in Madhya Pradesh is the first in the country to be fully functionally literate. This means that all adults in the Mandla district can now perform basic tasks like write their names, count and read and write in Hindi.

Mandla collector Harshika Singh told the media, "Tribals frequently complained to the authorities about money being taken from their bank accounts by fraudsters and the root cause of this was that they were not functionally literate." The authorities then set to work on mission mode and involved the school education department, women and child development department, anganwadi and social workers to bring about a transformation. On Independence Day 2020, collector Singh said the authorities launched the massive literacy campaign and achieved results two years later, as India marked its 76th Independence Day.

Mandla's distinction is important but it also highlights the huge gap in literacy in

India, not just in remote areas like Mandla or only among forest dwellers like the tribals in this case. As the world rapidly modernises, a significant portion of India risks being left behind if a level of basic literacy is not achieved in time. Most of the basic tasks in our world require a minimum proficiency in language and numbers as well as following instructions to say operate a device like a mobile phone. With increased digitisation and mechanisation, these tasks are going to be ubiquitous, if they are not already. Performing simple tasks like reading and writing words and numbers will not be enough for a world that has transformed drastically since the definition of functional literacy was first coined by UNESCO in 1978 and which is still in use today.

Key Points:

- Tribals were frequently complaining to authorities regarding money frauds they were facing. Main reason for this was that tribals were not functionally literate.
- To make people functionally literate, a major campaign was launched on Independence Day 2020, in association with the school education department, anganwadi & social workers, women and child development department, to educate women and senior citizens.
- With this campaign, entire district has turned into functionally literate district, within two years.
- Mandla is the first district of India to reach this mark, where people were able to write their names, read and count.

Functional Literacy:

Functional illiteracy comprises of reading and writing skills that are required to manage daily living and employment tasks. Such tasks require reading skills beyond basic level. It is opposite to illiteracy, which is defined as inability to read or write in any language. A person is called functionally literate when he or she is able to write his or her own name, count and read & write in Hindi or in language other than the predominant language.

2. Hunter-gatherers may have facilitated cultural revolutions via small social networks.

Hunter-gatherer human ancestors from around 3,00,000 years ago may have

facilitated a cultural revolution by developing ideas in small social networks, and regularly drawing on knowledge from their neighbouring camps, a new study says. The research, published in the journal *Science Advances*, mapped close-range social interactions between individuals of Agta hunter-gatherers in the Philippines using radio sensor technology every hour for one month. They found that the social structure of the hunter-gatherers, built around small family units linked by strong friendships and high in-between camp mobility, was key to the development of new cultural ideas. According to the scientists, this is because the social structure allowed for the co-existence of multiple traditions or solutions to a similar problem in different parts of the network. "It is fair to say that 'visits between camps' is the social media of current hunter-gatherers, and probably of our extinct hunter-gatherer ancestors," said study co-author and anthropologist Andrea Migliano from the University College London.

"When we need a new solution for a problem, we go online and use multiple sources to obtain information from a variety of people. Hunter-gatherers use their social network exactly in the same way," Migliano explained. The researchers said these constant visits between camps are essential for information to be recombined and continuously generate cultural innovations. In the study, the scientists selected pairs of individuals from the Agta hunter-gatherer community, based on the strength of their social ties, to combine different medicinal plants and share the discovery of any new super medicine with their close family ties.

They simulated this process over an artificial and fully connected network of a similar size, where all individuals were connected to each other and immediately transmitted any discoveries to all network members. The findings revealed that the rates of cultural evolution were much higher across the real hunter-gatherer social networks. While fully connected networks spread innovations more quickly, the real hunter-gatherer networks promoted the independent evolution of multiple medicines in different clusters of the network -- different camps, households, family clusters -- the study noted.

These independently developed medicines could be later recombined producing a more complex culture, the scientists said. "Previous studies have shown that fluid social structures already characterised expanding Upper Palaeolithic human populations and that long-range cultural exchange in the *Homo sapiens* lineage dates back to at least 3,20,000 years ago," said study co-author Lucio Vinicius from UCL. "However, the link we found between cultural evolution and the fluid sociality of hunter-gatherers indicates that as hunter-

gatherers expanded within and then out of Africa, this social structure of of small and interconnected bands may have facilitated the sequence of cultural and technological revolutions that characterises our species," he said. "Humans have a unique capacity to create and accumulate culture. From a simple pencil to the International Space Station, human culture is a product of multiple minds over many generations, and cannot be recreated from scratch by one single individual," said Mark Dyble, another co-author of the study from UCL. "This capacity for cumulative culture is central to humanity's success, and evolved in our past hunter-gatherer ancestors. Our work shows that the kind of social organisation that is typical of contemporary hunter-gatherers serves to promote cultural evolution," Dyble said.

3. Reflections On The Anthropology Of Religion - Analysis

With the advent of the human sciences, traditional philosophical figures cracked and the markers of meaning shifted. The anthropological field replaced the metaphysical instance to define the new space of human reflection. Philosophical work developed in relation to the human person : value systems are built, cultural messages are developed, ethical and political solidarity is woven. Religious anthropology teaches us that man is not man as homo religiosus, the one in whom religion and culture have the same matrix to spring forth from. Is it necessary to confuse the sacred with religion ? In other words, what is the field of religious anthropology on the one hand and, on the other, what is the nature of the sacred? What is the anthropology of religion? From its foundation in the 19th century to its current redeployment in contemporary societies and in the context of globalization, anthropology has always had a particular interest in religion, its origins, its forms and its variations.

The anthropology of religions is that branch of social and cultural anthropology which has developed from the study of particular religions (magic, witchcraft, animism, totemism, shamanism...) and empirical objects (myths, rites, beliefs, representations, social organizations...), by mobilizing theories and employing methods that give it a singular identity in the constellation of religious sciences. This field of anthropological knowledge, which was once considered a "science of primitive religions", is still relevant today to grasping religions, modern or not, in mutation and movement.

When it comes to restoring the anthropology of religions to its history and developments, two different versions can be written: Either it blends the contributions of philosophers, sociologists, historians or mythologists with those

of ethnologists without distinction : this is the way Brian Morris (1987), for example, paints the historical portrait of the “anthropological studies of religion” from Hegel to Lévi-Strauss, including the sociologists Max Weber, Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, and the psychologists Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Or, in a completely different perspective, the field of the anthropology of religions is more restrictive and is linked to a very particular academic tradition, that of the comparative study of non-Western societies and their belief systems.

Between the inclusive and integrative version and the restrictive and exclusive version, it is all a matter of perspective. And it is the latter that is retained here, for reasons that are easily explained : there is no anthropology of religions that is not first and foremost an anthropology (i.e. a comparative ethnography). Specifying the identity of the field of study selected here presupposes a prior clarification of what is meant by “anthropology”. The term is currently enjoying considerable popularity : there are a number of fields in which “anthropology” is encountered, which appears in this usage as a generic category in which it is possible to include oneself without further ado, as long as the discourse evokes Man (in general), culture, and claims a semblance of universality.

Anthropology and the concept of belief Anthropology has not only produced theories about particular religions: certain properties initially attributed to religion in general have been elevated to the status of particular objects of study, which have generated autonomous fields of knowledge. Beliefs, symbols, rites, myths and powers are, in one sense, “sacred” or “religious” and in this sense they are related to the anthropology of religions, even if, on the other hand, they go beyond the sphere of religion in the strict sense. Anthropology confers two statuses on the concept of belief : in the plural, it is embodied in objects that can be ethnographed by virtue of their materiality ; in the singular, it appears as a mental phenomenon, long considered to be a matter of psychology. Based on the study of its presumed or observed forms in the societies studied by ethnologists, the first category (“beliefs”) is of the order of descriptive language (“the x believe...”) and reveals the singularity of the objects of belief in a given group (“but they believe something else”).

It is precisely on this last point that the debate on the comparative scope of the concept of belief as a mental state, particular to religion or not, has been based. Beyond belief, it is another question, that of “faith” (of non-Western populations) that arises. Religious anthropology differs from ethnology, history and sociology of religions in that it tries to understand, beyond the chaos of religious facts, the man who creates and manipulates a whole symbolism, that of the “supernatural”

or the “sacred”. Naturally, the first task of religious anthropology is to define what distinguishes symbols of the sacred from other kinds of symbolism. There is no other way out, if one does not want to fall into the traps of ethnocentrism, than to start each time from the indigenous definitions and their classifications of things in a binary system: sacred and profane.

Religious anthropology was born in the second half of the nineteenth century ; unfortunately, at the beginning it posed a series of false problems : those of the origin, evolution or essence of religion ; hence the discredit from which it fell and from which it is only now recovering, through a change of perspective. Today, it appears either as a chapter of social anthropology (locating religious institutions in social structures and searching for the latent functions that these institutions fulfil in society as a whole) or – which is the viewpoint supported here – as an independent science.

Detail of Holy Family with an Angel, c. 1540, by Polidoro da Lanciano In this case, religion is studied in two dimensions: synchronic, as a coherent set or system of thoughts, affects and gestures; and diachronic, as a set that changes and modifies itself. In the first case, the anthropologist proposes models ; in the other, he looks for, if not laws, at least general processes, such as those of rebalancing the religious in relation to the rest of social life – whenever the gap is too great – or those of religious transfer from one field to another entirely different.

Religion and public life In the approach of most anthropologists and more broadly of researchers in the humanities, religion is not an autonomous anthropological object. It is considered to be expressive of the social (Durkheim), the political (Balandier), the psychic processes (Freud, Devereux), and the bad tricks that language is likely to play on us (Wittgenstein [1982] or Bataille, who considered that Christianity was basically nothing more than a crystallisation of language [1999]). In other words, for these various authors, religion is always second to what is not religion. It can only be understood as a metaphor: to believe in a deity is to believe in something else and to speak in religious terms is, as Durkheim said, « to say things differently than they are » (1960).

The first anthropologists hated religions, at least as historical institutions – Evans Pritchard says so explicitly (1972, 1974) – while questioning religion as one of the strongest affirmations of the social bond. It was, with kinship, through the study of the religious phenomenon that anthropology began to constitute itself as a scientific discipline, and this happened in Australia, or rather in relation to the

Australian aborigines. All the world's religions are today affected by the widespread movement of wealth, information and people. It is indeed extremely rare for a religion to be limited to a single country. Religions follow migration routes and spread through social networks.

Most migrants retain their beliefs and ritual practices in migration, disseminate them in the host country and encourage conversions. Irrespective of the movement of people, digital networks make available to everyone the information needed to join a religious movement. But religions are also partly the vector of these movements, since migration sometimes has a religious origin, whether it is international expansion linked to proselytism, transnational religious solidarity networks or religious conflicts. Beliefs, rituals and transnational communities are therefore both effects and causes of globalization.

Analysis of ritual practices The anthropology of religion means : a) studying the history of the relationships between the concepts of culture, religion and ideology in anthropology; b) becoming familiar with the different concepts of the anthropology of religions (myths, rituals, cosmology, polytheism, shamanism, etc.); c) questioning the diversity of the religious fact; and d) reflecting on the ideological and religious dimensions of contemporary societies. Anthropology of religions focuses on anthropological analysis of ritual practices that establish a relationship with imaginary forces and intentional agents (the occult/the divine), represented in bodies of myths and beliefs and deals with the Durkheimian and Weberian approaches.

It, also, covers the diversity of theoretical currents in chronological order (functionalist, structuralist, Marxist, interpretative, cognitiveist, postcolonial anthropology, etc.), and attempts to deal with most of the religious phenomena studied in priority by anthropology (shamanism, cults of possession, prophetism, witchcraft, divine royalties, cult of ancestors and spirits of nature, life cycle rituals, initiations, polytheisms and monotheisms). The anthropology of religion introduces anthropology and ethnography and presents some of the major currents in the anthropology of religion (functionalism, structuralism, etc.) and some of the classical or contemporary authors of the discipline (Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, Griaule, Geertz, Augé, etc.).) through a questioning of the origin and prehistory of religion, the cosmology of traditional societies, their representations of life and death, the relationship between religion, social and political organization, as well as certain contemporary debates concerning both Western and non-Western cultural areas (Africa, South America, Oceania, etc.).

The anthropology of the religious pursues two objectives: To deepen certain themes on the one hand ; and To explore the intersections of the religious and other fields of the discipline - politics, mobilities, inter-ethnics, the body and health, etc. - on the other hand. The central axis of the anthropology of religion is the theme of the religious in the public space, and it, also, covers the theories articulating the religious in modernity to the category of public space and public sphere, the importance of visual, auditory and performative practices in the production and/or maintenance of a public religiosity will be questioned. In addition, there is a focus on the modes of appropriation of public space by different religions under different political regimes.

The arenas where the interactions between politics and religion in modernity are observed, by comparing the public sphere and secularism as theoretical tools. In a second stage, the interest of religious anthropology focuses on the notion of religious plurality/mixity and on the notion of interreligious dialogue, identifying the fields that anthropologists have favoured to study them. In particular, it looks at pilgrimage as an expression of a religious person who gives himself or herself to be seen, participating in a form of public space, or even invading it, and the forms of tolerance and intolerance that can be deployed there.

Using examples, it examines the ways in which religious mixing and cohabitation are organized and experienced in this specific arena of the religious. Between religious anthropology, which makes explicit the view of a particular religion on man, his origins, the purpose of his life ; and the anthropology of religions, there is a considerable gap in terms of both object and method in anthropology. In fact, the anthropology of religions is man's view of God and of religion as an object of research. It is a human and not a divine perception of religion. It focuses on the study of rites, their functions and symbolism ; on the opposition of the sacred to the profane, on sacrifices and their crucial role in religious life. It also speaks of the human thirst for eternal life and the rejection of death, which is at the basis of all anthropological reflection.

4. Cultivating cooperation through kinship

Cooperation among biologically unrelated individuals is uniquely human While the capability for organisms to work together is by no means novel, humans possess an unparalleled capacity for cooperation that seems to contradict Darwinian evolutionary principles. Humans often exhibit traits--such as sympathy, loyalty, courage, and patriotism--that prioritize collective well-being

over individual fitness, and often cooperation occurs among individuals with no shared biological relation. This behavior, likewise, adapts in response to changing conditions, demonstrating the flexible nature of human cooperation. In "Identity, Kinship, and the Evolution of Cooperation," published in *Current Anthropology*, Burton Voorhees, Dwight Read, and Liane Gabora argue that humans' tendency toward these cooperative traits or ultrasociality--sets them apart.

They assert that components of human cooperation-- especially cooperative behavior between unrelated individuals--are unique, existing theories lack explanations for how this distinctly human shift to cooperative behavior arose and how cooperation is maintained within a population. Expanding upon the current literature, Voorhees, Read and Gabora present a theory that attributes unique elements of human cooperation to the cultivation of a shared social identity among members of a group. The authors propose that evolutionary developments in the brain enabled the acquisition of this shared identity by providing humans with the capability for reflective self- consciousness. Reflective self-consciousness allows an individual to fully recognize their own personhood and point of view.

In turn, recognition of their own experiences aided humans in identifying similar mental states in others, allowing humans to view themselves as part of a collective unit. The authors argue that cultural idea systems such as kinship systems, provided the necessary framework for cultivating this unique degree of cooperation among humanity. Unlike culture-gene theories where group characteristics develop from individual traits, cultural idea systems provide a top-down, organizational structure that establishes expectations of behavior among individuals in a group and leads individuals to view other members as kin.

As individuals are indoctrinated, or enculturated, in these systems, their worldviews are shaped. They develop an understanding of accepted cultural norms, how to interpret their environment and their experiences, and how to interact with one another. In particular, the authors assert that enculturation fosters feelings of obligation toward cultural kin. Emphasizing linkages between psychology and behavior, the authors suggest this obligation deterred individuals from deviating from accepted behaviors and in turn, sustained cooperative behavior within the group.

A shared social identity provided beneficial advantages. As a result, the authors

propose that an association developed between an individual's social identity and their survival instincts. In kinship systems, emotions are experienced within a specific cultural context, resulting in culture-laden mental feelings that prompt behavior. Voorhees, Read, and Gabora likewise argue that external cues contradicting existing culture-laden mental feelings can result in emotional reactions. Any behavior that diverges from cultural norms and threatens an individual's identity could be physiologically perceived as endangering their survival. Group members will feel driven to punish defectors in response. This theory can thus explain why failure to meet group obligations may evoke guilt in those who deviate from cultural expectations.

5. The scientific argument for marrying outside your caste

Community-based marriage systems remain prevalent in India despite rapid urbanisation and the proliferation of smaller families. As India becomes more globalised, there are intense deliberations in orthodox families on the merits of getting married within their own community. The obvious go-to-market strategy is to ask for family recommendations and visit websites tailored for the community. This is typically followed by patrika and gotra matching, and some family meetings. But as our scientific understanding of diseases and other heritable attributes increases, we have to question whether continued insistence on community-based marriages is relevant.

Endogamy is the practice of marrying within the same community, and genetic diseases arising out of a limited gene pool are a major consequence of it. There is a growing need to reflect on these practices and determine what's the best way to choose a life partner. A tradition gains ground Getting married within one's community made sense through history, in times of longer commutes between villages and lack of effective communication tools. Further, our social structures have dictated community behaviours for a long time, from the way communities prepare food to the way they pray (if they choose to). It makes sense that parents prefer to get their children married within communities – it is easier to welcome a family member or send them into familiar traditions.

For example, a non-vegetarian woman marrying into an orthodox vegetarian family would find her diet constrained. Attending family gatherings if you do not speak your partner's native tongue can also make you feel like an outsider. But as India's families become more nuclear, and globalisation transcends traditions, one has to wonder if it makes sense to stick to this community-based

marriage system. Endogamy today Community-based marriage systems remain prevalent despite rapid urbanisation and the proliferation of smaller families. They are surprisingly more prevalent among rich urban Indians than the rest of the country. The option of choosing from the community is really not wrong or unethical, but it comes today with one major caveat – genetic diseases.

Centuries of endogamy have led to a limited gene pool within communities. If there is a defective gene in this gene pool, its presence gets amplified across generations. This might not necessarily lead to diseases. Inbreeding led the Habsburg royals to have peculiar jaws and also eventually led to the demise of their rule as the last king could not produce any children. The presence of genetic mutations that lead to diseases present in a community gene pool puts future generations at heightened risk. Striking examples of such phenomena are present all around the world, from the Ashkenazi Jews predisposed to Tay-Sachs to Arya Vaisya community members who cannot break down a particular anaesthetic molecule. Interestingly, it is advised that one should not get married into one's own gotra.

This system suggests some semblance of cognisance that marrying into one's family could cause adverse reactions. Yet, once a woman gets married, her gotra supposedly changes to her husband's. Under this system, one is allowed to marry their aunt's children. The changing of gotra does not mean that the woman's genes have changed, and you share an equitable gene pool across all your cousins. The custom of marrying cousins further exacerbates the impact of a decadent gene pool. The freedom to make an informed choice Community-based marriages should, therefore, come with a warning (actually this is true for any marriage, but endogamy increases the risk). The children of such a marriage may be predisposed to genetic defects and diseases. For a select list of diseases, genetic tests are available to identify the likelihood of a potential child suffering from them.

For example, mutations that cause thalassemia, a blood disorder, are well-known. When both the genes in a child are mutated, the child suffers from a full-blown form of the disease – thalassemia major. If only one gene is mutated, the child suffers from a milder version – thalassemia minor. Pre-checking of parental DNA for thalassemia-related mutations can predict the likelihood of the child developing thalassemia. If there is a strong likelihood, parents could choose to screen the child during pregnancy or opt for pre implantation genetic diagnosis to determine and implant a healthy child. Gene-testing is now becoming more common, with the idea of a gene “patrika” – to see whether a

couple is genetically compatible – gathering ground.

However, robust scientific data only helps determine risk with regard to a limited number of diseases. There is no scientific evidence to perform genetic matches to pre-determine other attributes such as health, intelligence, etc. Genetic analysis is also not advanced enough to actually suggest matches based on compatibility. The danger with genetic testing, however, is that we have only scratched the surface of how genes work and what we can learn from studying them. The other end of the genetic compatibility spectrum is to get swayed by untested scientific claims regarding marital compatibility and physical attributes of future children. India as a society needs our future generations to be healthy, educated and productive individuals. There is a nature and nurture component to their development – endowing them with healthy genes, bringing them up in a peaceful environment, and providing them the opportunities to learn and explore. But for that we need to give our current generations the education and freedom to make informed choices about their partners.

INDIAN & TRIBAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation (NSTFDC), extends concessional loans to Scheduled Tribe persons for undertaking income generation activities



The National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation (NSTFDC), a PSU under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, extends concessional loans to the eligible Scheduled Tribe persons for undertaking income generation

activities / self-employment as per the schematic norms. The schemes of NSTFDC are implemented across the country. The prominent schemes of NSTFDC are given as under:

Term Loan Scheme: NSTFDC provides Term Loan for viable projects costing upto ₹50.00 lakh per unit. Under the scheme, financial assistance is extended upto 90% of the cost of the project and the balance is met by way of subsidy/ promoter contribution/ margin money.

Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana (AMSY): This is an exclusive scheme for economic development of Scheduled Tribes Women. Under the scheme, NSTFDC, provides loan upto 90% for projects costing upto ₹2.00 lakh. Financial assistance under the scheme is extended at highly concessional rate of interest of 4% per annum.

Micro Credit Scheme for Self Help Groups (MCF): This is an exclusive scheme for Self Help Groups for meeting small loan requirement of ST member. Under the scheme, the Corporation provides loans upto ₹50,000/- per member and maximum ₹5 Lakh per Self Help Group (SHG).

Adivasi Shiksha Rrinn Yojana (Education Loan Scheme): This is an Education loan scheme to enable the ST students to meet expenditure for pursuing technical and professional education including Ph.D. in India. Under this scheme, the Corporation provides financial assistance upto ₹10.00 lakh per eligible family at concessional rate of interest of 6% per annum. The students eligible for interest subsidy from Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India, during the moratorium period i.e. course period plus one year after completion of course or six months after getting the job, whichever is earlier.

Margin Money Support Scheme for ST Entrepreneurs: In order to finance projects under the Stand-Up India Scheme of Government of India, a separate scheme titled “Margin Money Support Scheme for ST Entrepreneurs” has been formulated in December 2020. Under this scheme, the eligible ST Entrepreneurs are allowed to avail financial assistance of NSTFDC to the extent of 15% of the total project cost under Stand-Up India Scheme.

NSTFDC extend its loan through the implementing agencies. No instance has come to the notice of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs where NSTFDC has rejected any proposal of the implementing agencies fulfilling the loan disbursement criteria of NSTFDC.

NSTFDC, from time to time, in association with its implementing agencies conduct Awareness Programmes for dissemination of information about NSTFDC and its schemes.

NSTFDC notionally allocates target of disbursement of funds to the States/ UTs in proportion to ST population against the fund availability. During last three financial years, NSTFDC disbursed funds exceeding the notional allocation made for the respective years, which indicates effectiveness of Awareness Programmes in generation of loan applications.

This information was given by the Minister of State for Tribal Affairs Smt. Renuka Singh Saruta in a in the Lok Sabha today.

2. Scheme 'Tribal Festival, Research Information and Mass Education'



The 'Tribal Festival, Research Information and Mass Education', is a **Central Sector Scheme** under which reputed organizations, research institutes, universities where expertise exist and which have already made a mark by carrying out pioneering research in their respective field are provided financial support in critical areas.

The purpose of scheme is to create **replicable models in areas of education, health, livelihood, digital governance** etc. Under the scheme Grant-in Aid to Centres of Excellence (CoEs), financial support is provided to such Organisations, to enhance and strengthen the institutional resource capabilities to conduct qualitative, action oriented and policy research for development of

the tribal communities. Under the scheme projects of all India or Inter State nature like migration, research on diseases are also taken.

Under the scheme of Grants to Centre of Excellences and projects of all India or Inter State nature, MoTA has collaborated with reputed organisations working for tribal welfare in the areas of education, health, entrepreneurship development, water conservation, awareness programmes for Panchayati Raj Institutions, Forest Rights and organic farming as part of affirmative action with Ministry of Tribal Affairs and has developed various innovative models which can be replicated across the country.

3. TRIFED signs MoU with Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini- Nation First Policy Research Centre (RMP-NFPRC) to leverage knowledge, expertise and institutional strengths



As a part of its mission to improve the livelihoods of the tribals (both forest dwellers and artisans) and work towards tribal empowerment, TRIFED, ever since its conception in August 1987, has been carrying out several programmes and initiatives.

A major game-changing initiative that has been implemented by TRIFED in the recent past is the Van Dhan programme, which TRIFED is spearheading in 27 States/UTs and 307 Districts with availability of MFPs as well as significant forest dwelling tribal population. In a bid to expand its activities and help more and more tribals, TRIFED has been getting into active collaboration with like-minded organisations, be it in the private or public sector. The objective of these collaborations is to combine the synergies so that tribals can get maximum benefit.

TRIFED entered into an agreement with Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini- Nation First Policy Research Centre (RMP-NFPRC) on December 29, 2021. This MoU is for a collaborative effort in leveraging knowledge, expertise and institutional strengths. The scope of the partnership, which came into effect from December 29, 2021 itself, will include, but is not limited to the following strategic areas:

- To develop and execute research projects around tribal development and related activities.
- To engage in assessing and reviewing the existing and upcoming government schemes like Van Dhan Yojana.
- To publish research findings in the form of joint reports, or any other publication(s).
- To promote and disseminate research, conduct sessions, and meetings with experts on the topic.
- To jointly host conferences, seminars and other such activities pertaining to the research.
- To exchange information, provide access to personnel(s) and data relevant to the research in hand.
- To forge collaborations with other like-minded entities outside this agreement, if found mutually desirable.
- To allow access to information from regional offices, state implementing agencies and other entities relevant to the scope of the project.

Among its flagship programmes and implementations, The 'Mechanism for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through Minimum Support Price (MSP) & Development of Value Chain for MFP' Scheme, in particular, has impacted the tribal ecosystem as never before. Implemented by TRIFED in association with State Government Agencies across 21 states of the country, the scheme has injected more than Rs 3000 crores directly in the tribal economy since April 2020. Aided by the Government push in May 2020 wherein the prices of Minor Forest Produce (MFPs) were increased by up to 90% and the inclusion of 23 new items in the MFP list, this flagship scheme of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, which draws its strength from The Forest Rights Act of 2005, aims to provide remunerative and fair prices to tribal gatherers of forest produces.

The Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, also a component of the same scheme, further complements MSP beautifully and has emerged as a source of employment generation for tribal gatherers and forest dwellers and the home-bound tribal artisans. The beauty of the programme is that it ensures that the proceeds from the sales of these value-added products go to the tribals directly.

To take this to the next logical phase, TRIFED is exploring convergences with organisations, government and non-government and academic, to continue its mission towards tribal empowerment. The aim is to pooling strengths together and undertake work that will help in boosting the income and livelihoods of the tribal people.

TRIFED continues to work towards generating income and livelihoods for tribal people through such flagship schemes like the MSP for MFP and the Van Dhan Yojana.

4. ST panel issues notice to states on tribals displaced due to left-wing extremism



The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) has asked Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Maharashtra to submit a report on the action taken to identify and rehabilitate around 5,000 tribal families displaced from Chhattisgarh due to left-wing extremism. The NCST and the Union Tribal Affairs Ministry had in July 2019 asked these states to conduct a survey to ascertain the number of tribals displaced due to left-wing extremism before December 13, 2019, so that a process could be initiated to rehabilitate them. The states were given three months to complete the survey. In October 2019, the Union Home Ministry also wrote to these state governments to find out how many tribals had been displaced from Chhattisgarh.

"The state government trained these fighters in armed struggle and provided them with weapons. They would vandalise the homes and shops of suspected Maoist supporters, while Maoists would kill those suspected of being government informers," he said. "The Salwa Judum movement drew criticism from human rights observers as people found themselves caught in the crossfire between the two sides. It led to the mass displacement of an estimated 50,000 tribals from Chhattisgarh to neighbouring states," Chaudhary said.

The Supreme Court had banned the Chhattisgarh government-sponsored vigilante movement in 2011. Tribal rights activists say the tribals, who fled Chhattisgarh due to Maoist violence, are living in 248 settlements in forests of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Maharashtra. These tribals are living in deplorable conditions without any access to drinking water and electricity. They get lower wages, and most of them do not have ration cards or voter IDs and cannot prove their citizenship. Rights activists claim these states do not recognise them as tribals.

They have no rights over forest land and remain excluded from all social security benefits. "The situation of the displaced tribals has worsened during the Covid pandemic. Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have carried out plantations on around half of the land they used for cultivating crops for around 15 years," he claimed. Last year, the Chhattisgarh government had told the state assembly that no issue pertaining to the displacement of tribals due to left-wing extremism had come to their notice. "Chhattisgarh says no one migrated and Andhra and Telangana are making renewed efforts to push them back. The Union Home Ministry should rehabilitate them like the Bru tribals from Mizoram," Chaudhary said.

According to the Home Ministry, a "large number of minority Bru (Reang) families migrated to North Tripura in 1997-1998 due to ethnic violence in the western part of Mizoram in October 1997. Approximately 30,000 (5,000 families) Bru migrants were given shelter in six relief camps set-up in Kanchanpur district of North Tripura".

In July, 2018, an agreement was signed by the Centre and the governments of Mizoram and Tripura and the Mizoram Bru Displaced People's Forum for repatriation of 5,407 Bru families comprising 32,876 people residing in temporary camps in Tripura.

According to the ministry's annual report for the year 2019-20, "328 families comprising 1,369 people persons to Mizoram under the agreement up to November 11, 2019. There has been a sustained demand of Bru families that they may be settled down in Tripura, considering their apprehensions about their security." Chaudhary said the tribal families displaced from Chhattisgarh can apply for land titles under a "lesser-used" provision in the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which recognises people's right of settlement in forests and gives them a legal document of ownership of their traditional habitation.

Their original villages are in deep jungle, miles away from the main road, and Maoists continue to be a threat there, he said. The displaced tribal families have asked the government to consider their plea for land under the FRA provision for 'in situ rehabilitation', wherein alternative land can be given against the one they were forced to leave before 2005. Section 3 (1) (m) of the Act states: "Right to in situ rehabilitation including alternative land in cases where the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers have been illegally evicted or displaced from forest land of any description without receiving their legal entitlement to rehabilitation prior to the 13th day of December 2005."

5. Denied road for decades, Nilgiri tribespeople trek 8km to bury their dead



Their battle is not just for a road, which might ease their daily burden, but longing for a life in the village and fear of losing ancestral homelands where they bury the dead.

Kurumba tribal families in Vagapanai hamlet in Kotagiri in Tamil Nadu have moved out the lands where they once cultivated ragi and other millets because of livelihood concerns. After all, it isn't easy to trek 16 kms up and down a day to buy essentials, take their kids to school or to sell off their harvest to make a living. The nearest road is 8km away from the hamlet once cohabited by Irula and Kurumba tribal families.

But everytime there is a death in the family, members of Kurumba tribe return to Vagapanai to make that trek carrying the corpse in makeshift stretchers. Burying their dead in ancestral lands is integral to their faith and there is no option for the kin when death comes calling. For the Irula tribe residents of the hamlet, with around 60 houses, the drudgery is however a daily routine.

Their demand for a road is now more than four decades old. Vagapanai residents once had a cemented footpath and stairs till a cliff, a point to cool their heels during the arduous trek leading to the hamlet. The footpath and stairs were washed away due to heavy rains over the period. The route is slippery because of algae deposition and there is a deep gorge where the footpath ends. But tribespeople don't seem to be worried about the risky trek. Men and women and children walk together with loads of firewood, ration provisions and school bags on their heads to avoid encounters with wildlife, which could prove dangerous.

"The maximum weight I can carry is the 5kg of rice provided by the government. Even to get this rice, we have to start walking at 6am, so that we can at least reach the Kotada tea estate by 10 in the morning. But our routine will be interrupted and we cannot exactly say the estimated time to reach the places, if either it rains or wild animals like elephants and Indian gaurs cross the path," says 70-year-old Neeli, who also has to take care of her grandchildren. She doesn't seem to harbour the hope of seeing a road being laid in her lifetime. "What can we do if the government is not laying a road to our village? Nothing. We have to walk till our end, it seems. We are somewhat accustomed to it," says Neeli.

It's not that residents of the hamlet want a road up to their doorsteps, which might be impossible due to the nature of terrain. "We don't want a road that covers the entire stretch. But at least they can build a road till the cliff, which seems feasible," says Vadugi, a tribal woman from the village. Vadugi recently returned to Vagapanai after staying with her daughter and says she used to stay

away from the village for long periods because life wasn't easy there. Accessing medical care during emergencies was the hardest. "If they lay a road, at least there would be auto rickshaws and our lives would become easier. It will also help generate more opportunities to work. Once the road is here, I would never leave this place," says Vadugi.

Pichaimuthu, a tribesman from Vagapanai, undertakes long walks on week days with his grandchild till the Kotada estate, where the child can board a bus to Kil Kotagiri. "I want him to study but it's dangerous because of the presence of wild animals," says Pichaimuthu. After his child boards the bus to Kil Kotagiri, where the school is located, Pichaimuthu would return to the village where he would work. "In the evening I will walk to the estate to pick him up," he says.

Balan, Vagaipani's tribal chieftain says the farming as a business activity has stopped and most members of tribes now work as labourers in tea estates. "If we arrive late at Kotada then we can't get back to the village. It's also hard for us if there's a medical emergency," he says.

Kengarai Panchayat president J Murugan says only people who don't know the lifestyle of the tribes would say they could shift to nearby towns. "Irula and Kurumba tribes are guardians of nature and have lived here for hundreds of years. They also have around 200 acres of community land which is enough to lead a sustainable life," says Murugan. Many families left because of lack of amenities like roads. "They are not involved in agriculture anymore. They cultivate coffee every year, but the absence of facilities to transport it forces them to be at the mercy of middlemen who reduce the price. This is not about roads, it's about their life in their village without having to lose their ancestral homelands," says Murugan.

He has made an appeal for a road facility to the District Collector, Secretary of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj and the Minister of Forest. He also got the No Objection Certificate (NOC) to lay the road for 2 kilometres, between Kotada B Division field number 3 junction and field number 4 and 5 inside the tea estate from the Stanes Amalgamated Estates Ltd. "Their burial rituals should be respected. The kin of the deceased want to conduct the last rites in their ancestral village. Imagine the plight of people who have to carry the corpse for 8km on makeshift stretchers through the forest. This is what is happening here," says Murugan. further.

Building a road not impossible

Thirumoorthy, a tribal rights activist from Kotagiri, says absence of village headsmen who can take up the issues and present them before government officials in advisory bodies is also an issue. "Lack of communication skills is a problem. Also, we don't have strong village headsmen who can speak their mind" says Thirumoorthy.

His village Chemmanarai got the road facilities recently. "Our leaders took up the issue with the administration frequently to get the work done. But today not many village headsmen make it even to the district's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) Council, where leaders of tribal communities like Toda and Kota ignore our headsmen. In the Nilgiris, there are many villages that don't have road facilities. The mindset of the officials also cannot be ignored. They might wonder why spend crores to lay a road to a village which has just 50 households. But the mindset is not to be seen when similar petitions are moved by people of Toda and Kota tribes," says Thirumoorthy, pointing out graded inequalities.

Jeyaraman, who heads the Nilgiris DRDA project, told TNM that they are not ignoring anyone. "I visited Vagapanai village after the District Collector's direction. The initial 2.6 kilometres run through a private estate but it has road formation. The next stretch at the edge of the estate starts with a stream and a rocky formation. We have to construct a small bridge if a motorable road is to be built. But after that, from the stream to their village, the path is only a metre-wide. Demolishing the rocky structures to widen it is out of question. Getting clearances from the forest department is also not possible. But a proposal for the road to Vagapanai has been sent to the District Collector's office," says Jeyaraman. To lay motorable roads to the tribal hamlets at least they require a width of three metres.

The government provides funds based on priorities but in some places, even though the funds are there, the forest department raises objections because the project has potential to harm wildlife," says Jeyaraman, adding that they have proposed link roads to all the tribal hamlets in Nilgiris. "If permission is granted, we would definitely lay the road to Vagapanai but there are concerns about ecology and wildlife," he says.

6.Movement for Adivasi autonomy: a revolution of India's Indigenous Peoples

The Adivasis of India have been fighting for the protection of their collective right to self-determination, autonomy and identity, and for reclaiming their rights over land, territories and natural resources for centuries. The Pathalgari Movement, a powerful mass movement fighting for these rights that took place in the recent past, was criminalized and crushed by the Indian State because it had directly challenged Indian authorities.

The word 'Adivasi' combines two Hindi words: Adi and Vasi, which literally translate to original inhabitant, aboriginal or first settler. Adivasis are the first settlers of India –the Indigenous Peoples of the country–. However, constitutionally they are merely classified as Scheduled Tribes and have been guaranteed certain special rights and privileges. There are 744 Adivasi/tribal ethnic groups in India, and out of these, 705 are designated as Scheduled Tribes in 30 States and Union Territories. Several Adivasi ethnic groups have yet to be designated; when and if they officially become Scheduled Tribes, the percentage of the Adivasi population would increase and thus have a significant and direct impact on the demography and politics of the country.

Unfortunately, the Indian government has repeatedly denied the existence of Adivasis as the Indigenous Peoples of India in front of the United Nations' Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Nevertheless, on 13 September 2007, the Indian State voted in favour of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and on 5 January 2011, the Apex Court of India in its statement said that tribal peoples (Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis) are the descendants of the original inhabitants of India and, as a group, are one of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities in the country.

The advance on the resources of the Adivasi

According to the 2011 census, Adivasis constitute 8.6 per cent of India's total population (or 104 million people). The Adivasis have been living in or around forests in a rhythm akin to that of the nature around them. They do not merely depend on the natural resources for their livelihood, but their sole identity, culture, autonomy, conscience, tradition, ethos and existence are based on it. The government's data suggests that 89.9 per cent of Adivasis still live in rural areas. The basic characteristics of the Adivasi community is that it is casteless, classless, communitarian, based on equality, has a community-based economic system, co-

exists with nature, applies consent-based self-rule, operates with dignity and is autonomous.

However, the economic liberalisation, globalization and privatization of India has created terrible impacts in the social fabric, economy, politics, culture and idea of community development in the country. The self-dependent community has been compelled to become government-dependent due to various factors arising out of misguided official policies. The Adivasis have thus been alienated from their land, territory and resources.

Historically, the Adivasis had traditional ownership rights over their lands, territories and natural resources, but everything changed with the establishment of the Raj (British rule of the Indian subcontinent) and its interference in the matter of country's natural resources. The British Indian Government enacted various laws to exert control over Adivasi lands, territories and natural resources, which resulted in the marginalization of the Adivasis.

After India's independence, the situation of Adivasis became even worse. Their lands, forests, water bodies and minerals were snatched, alienating them in the name of development and national interest, and also under the guise of wildlife protection. The government constantly expanded its control over natural resources by enacting numerous legislations, including the Wild Life Protection Act of 1972 and Forest Conservation Act of 1980, that disenfranchised Adivasis in the name of protection, preservation and conservation of forests and wildlife.

According to available data, between 1950 and 2000, 60 million people have been displaced or affected by development projects, such as mega power projects, irrigation projects, power plants, mining projects and cement plants in the country. Out of these, at least 40 per cent are Adivasis and 20 per cent are Dalits (the lowest caste people also known as 'untouchables'). Some 25 per cent of these displaced were rehabilitated, while the rest have received virtually nothing.

Despite this, local governments are busy luring investors by weakening existing land safeguarding laws and organizing investor summits in federal state capitals. Land banks were also formed and community land (commons), sacred groves and forest lands were enlisted in these land banks without consent of the village councils, which under Indian legislation are the supreme authorities in Adivasi villages. In effect, the existing laws are grossly violated to serve corporate interests.

7. A new chapter of the Pathalgari Movement

In 2017, while mobilizing the Munda Adivasi community of the Khunti region of Jharkhand State for the reclamation of their collective rights over their lands, territories and natural resources, the leaders of organisation Adivasi Mahasabha understood the importance of the cultural Pathalgari symbol for the community and strategically used it for the mass movement.

The movement was formally launched on 9 February of the same year in Bhandra village as a protest against land law amendments enacted by the Jharkhand state government. The amendments would allow for the commercial use of Adivasi land, acquisition of agricultural land for non-agriculture purposes and prohibition of land transfer through compensation. The first two amendments would have adverse effects on the Adivasis of Jharkhand precisely because the state government has enlisted 2.1 million acres of so-called government land in the land bank, including sacred groves, village paths, playgrounds, graveyards, forest lands, hills, etc.

The state government also organized a Global Investors Summit and signed 210 new Memoranda of Understanding with corporate houses.

These events triggered the Pathalgari Movement and stone plaques were installed in more than 200 villages claiming the supreme authority of traditional village councils. Drawing from the custom, they display messages on large stone slabs, painted green and white, measuring about 15 feet by 4 feet. The movement seeks to replace the power of the central and state governments with that of the local Gram Sabha (village council). The message they display include excerpts from the Indian Constitution and Supreme Court judgements, as well as warnings to outsiders that inform them not to enter the villages without permission of the village headman.

The movement declared full non-cooperation against the Indian State. They issued identity cards to villagers, opened their own schools with different syllabi,

and established their own bank and traditional health care system. They also deployed traditional guards (dressed in traditional outfits and armed with bows & arrows) in every village, whose duty was to prevent outsiders from entering their villages without prior permission from the village headmen.

8. Manipur tribal groups write to PM Modi demanding NRC



The move by groups representing indigenous communities follows a similar demand by seven students' organisations that flagged the 'ever-increasing number of non-local residents' in Manipur.

Groups representing indigenous communities have stepped up the demand for the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Manipur.

Organisations representing 19 tribal federations and tribes such as Tangkhul, Zeme, Liangmai, Aimol, Maring and Kom have submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking the NRC for filtering the foreigners out, putting them in detention centres and deporting them.

Copies of the memorandum were on July 12 submitted to Home Minister Amit Shah, Manipur Governor La Ganeshan and Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh.

The organisations thanked the Centre for extending the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 to Manipur, thereby making the State the fourth in the

Northeast to be brought under the Inner-Line Permit (ILP) system that requires Indians from elsewhere to possess a temporary travel document.

No definition of 'indigenous inhabitants' yet

But the ILP has not had much of an impact as Manipur is yet to come up with the definition of "indigenous inhabitants". The stumbling blocks could be removed if the NRC was implemented, they said.

Flagging the "intrusion of immigrants" from Bangladesh (East Pakistan formerly), Myanmar and Nepal, the organisations recalled a pass or permit system for Manipur that was abolished by then Chief Commissioner Himmat Singh in November 1950. This permit system regulated the entry and settlement of outsiders in Manipur.

People from these three countries "autonomously settled" in the State since the abolition of the pass system and no discerning step was taken up during the last 75 years under the Foreigners Act of 1946, the organisations said. This "continuous overflow of influxes" had led to migrants "take possession" of the socio-economic and political rights of the indigenous people, they said.

If Bangladeshi and Myanmar Muslims had "occupied" the Assembly constituency of Jiribam and spread to other valleys in Manipur, Kuki people from Myanmar

now owned large swathes of the hills while the "Nepali population has raised tremendous number", the 19 organisations said.

The organisations recalled a movement in the 1980s for the detection and deportation of foreigners from Manipur, following which the State government had signed two agreements for using 1951 as the base year for determining foreigners or non-residents and evicting them. But no steps were taken up, they lamented.

"The foreigners are a great threat to the indigenous people of Manipur" and the whole of India in the long term, the organisations said.

The memorandum of the tribal organisations followed a similar plea by seven students' bodies in the State, including the All Manipur Students' Union, the All Naga Students' Association of Manipur and the Manipuri Students' Federation.

Apart from the NRC with 1951 as the base year for recognising domicile, the students' bodies demanded the establishment of a State Population Commission to "check and balance the population growth". They said the indigenous communities were being "swamped and marginalised" in their own State by the "ever-increasing population" of outsiders.

9. More than 50% of India's tribal population has moved out of traditional habitats



Tribals are quitting farming fast; every second household now survives on manual labour in an informal economy

It is a demographic change nobody would celebrate. About 55 per cent of the country's tribal population now resides outside their traditional habitats. It is known that migration of tribal population, increasingly distress-driven, has been increasing. But the recently-released **Tribal Health in India** report by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has brought out some worrying aspects to this known development.

More than half the country's 104 million tribal population now resides outside India's 809 tribal majority blocks. To support this fundamental change in tribal

habitation, the report cites the Census 2011 that found a 32 per cent decline in the number of villages with 100 per cent tribal population between 2001 and 2011.

“There is a movement of tribal people from tribal to non-tribal areas, possibly in search of livelihood and educational opportunities,” says the report. But it is insistent on a livelihood crisis that is triggering this exodus.

India’s tribal population is over-dependent on agriculture and forest-related livelihood sources. While 43 per cent of non-tribals depend on agriculture, 66 per cent of the tribal population survives on these primary sector livelihood sources. But in recent decades, the number of tribal farmers is coming down, and more are becoming agricultural labourers. In the past decade, 3.5 million tribals have quit farming and other related activities. Between 2001 and 2011 census reports, the number of tribal cultivators reduced by 10 per cent while number of agricultural labourers increased by 9 per cent.

This indicates a declining return from direct farming or people simply don’t have the resources to do farming. In the absence of no other alternative, they are joining the informal labour force. “Displacement and enforced migration has also led to an increasing number of Scheduled Tribes working as contract labourers in the construction industry and as domestic workers in major cities. Currently, one of every two tribal households relies on manual labour for survival,” says the report.

10. Launch a national tribal health mission



Issues concerning Tribals (health-related):

- **As per 'The Lancet: 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Health' (2016)'**: India has the second highest infant mortality rate for the tribal people, next only to Pakistan.
- Child malnutrition is **50% higher in tribal children**: 42% compared to 28% in others
- **Nearly five and a half crores** live outside the Scheduled Areas, as a scattered and marginalized minority. They are the most powerless.
- **Malaria and tuberculosis** are three to 11 times more common among the tribal people.
- **Poor health Infrastructure**: There is a **27% to 40% deficit** in the number of **Primary health facilities**, and a **33% to 84%** deficit in medical doctors in tribal areas.
- **Low participation**: Seventh, there is hardly any participation of the tribal people - locally or at the State or national level - in designing, planning or delivering health care to them.
- **Financial outlay under the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)**, equal to the percentage of the ST population in the State, has been completely flouted by all States.

Solution:

- **Launch a National Tribal Health Action Plan** to bring the status of health and healthcare at par with the respective State averages in the next 10 years.
- **Address 10 priority health problems**, the health care gap, the human resource gap and the governance problems.
- **Allocation of additional money** so that the per capita government health expenditure on tribal people becomes equal to the stated goal of the National Health Policy (2017), i.e., **2.5%** of the per capita GDP.
- **Mission mode implementation**: The Health Minister and the 10 States with a sizable tribal population should take the initiative.

Conclusion:

The tribal healthcare system is sick, and tribal people need more substantive solutions. We need to move from symbolic gestures to substantive promises, from promises to a comprehensive action plan, and from an action plan to realising the goal of a healthy tribal people. If actualised, the Tribal Health

Mission can be the path to a **peaceful health revolution** for the 11 crore tribal people.

11. Do tribal lives matter? Life expectancy, health indicators stay poor in Madhya Pradesh



Malnutrition in the tribal population is 1.5 times higher than the national average

Madhya Pradesh has the highest number of Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in India but the lowest life expectancy among nine Indian states that make up half of the country's population, according to a study. Several health and nutritional indicators are among the reasons behind the shorter life span among the STs in the state, the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs said in a 2019 statement.

Jetli (70), a resident of Chhapri village in Madhya Pradesh's Jhabua district, is a great-grandmother of two. She has witnessed three generations in her life, which, she said, is not as many as it used to be when she was a child. "When I was five-six years old, at least five generations of my family used to live together," she said. Jetli believes that people of her community – the Bhil tribe that is a majority in the district – are not living as long as they used to some decades ago.

A few kilometres away in Golabadi village, 34-year old Narangi Prem has five children and no grandchildren. Jitri Bai, a local of the same village in her mid-50s, has four children and no grandchildren. While the latter is an extreme case, this is not an indication of a decreasing lifespan but that of awareness. The local population has been getting married at slightly later ages – from 14 years a few decades ago to 19-21 years now – due to interventions by local non-profits. They also have fewer children – down to two from five.

“Because of this, they feel like they are living shorter lives because they are seeing fewer generations but their life expectancy has actually increased over the years,” said Dr Pratibha Pandey, senior specialist, health at ChildFund India – a non-profit working on malnutrition in children in MP since the 1980s – to DTE. However, the life expectancy of India’s tribal communities has always been lower than the national average. The current life expectancy of STs is 63.9 years, lower than the 67 years for the general population, according to the ministry of tribal affairs.

If you look at it in isolation, the life expectancy of STs has been increasing but it consistently remains the poorest among all social groups. An April 2022 study published in the Population and Development Review estimated life expectancy based on data from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) and the Sample Registration Surveys between 1997-2000 and 2013-2016. It found that “Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes have drastically and persistently lower life expectancies than high caste individuals.”

In 1997-2000, the life expectancy at birth of ST women was 57 years, lower than women in other social groups – SCs (58 years), other backward classes (OBC; 60.7), Muslims (62.2) and high caste people (64.3). In 2013-2016, the life expectancy at birth of ST women increased to 68, marginally better than that of SC women (67.8), but consistently worse than Muslims and OBCs (69.4 each) and high caste individuals (72.2). A similar trend is recorded when looking at life expectancy at birth for men, which was at 54.5 years in 1997-2000 for STs. It was, again, lowest among men in all social groups – SCs (58.3), OBCs (60.2), Muslim (62.6) and high caste people (62.9).

In 2013-2016, all five groups recorded an increase but the trend remains constant. The life expectancy at birth for ST men improved to 62.4 years, lowest still than SC (63.3), OBC (66), Muslim en (66.8) and high caste (69.4). How poor, then, is the life expectancy of tribals in MP – the state with the highest ST population in absolute figures (15 million), according to the 2011 Census?

At 57.4 years for men and 60.1 years for women, Madhya Pradesh recorded the lowest ST life expectancy among nine states – Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, a March 2022 study showed published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) showed. The estimates were made based on data from India's Annual Health Survey, 2010-2011.

However, this isn't the only cause of concern.

Kalia Dutiya (70), a resident of Golabadi village in Jhabua, believes a lot has changed in the last two decades. "We had no machinery back then to aid us with our farm labour. So we used to do a lot of physical work," he said. Even the ghee and milk they get from their cows or crops don't smell the same anymore, he said, adding:

Our crops and dairy aren't as nutritious as they used to be due to chemicals. Earlier, we used to grow what was naturally occurring, and consuming that gave us a lot of strength. There is a consensus among the residents of Jhabua and Alirajpur about how their strength and stamina has reduced over time. Both the districts have recorded high levels of malnutrition. As much as 49.3 per cent of children under five in Jhabua are stunted, 17.9 per cent are wasted while 41.7 per cent are underweight, according to the National Family Health Survey (2019-2021).

The indicators are slightly better in Alirajpur – 34.6 per cent are stunted, 15.4 per cent are wasted and 31.6 per cent are underweight. Of the six Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres (NRC) in Alirajpur – 70 total beds – all are always occupied either at capacity or beyond, according to chief medical health officer Dr Prakash Dhoke. The figures are similar in the four NRCs – 50 total beds – in

Jhabua. "Malnutrition in the tribal population is 1.5 times higher than the national average. For severely malnourished children, we need hospitalisation. But their health-seeking behaviour is very poor," Dr Pandey said. Surya Punia Maida, a resident of Umradara village in Jhabua district, was not even five years old when she died of pulmonary tuberculosis (TB) on 28 January 2021. But that wasn't the real cause of death. Weighing barely 8 kilograms at the time, close to half of what a girl her age should typically weigh, she was extremely malnourished and highly anaemic.

Months before she was diagnosed with TB in December 2020, her father had already been suffering from it. While his treatment is currently underway, Dr Pandey believes it's likely he's the source of infection. However, Surya's persisting malnourished state since birth weakened her immune system and, therefore, her chances of survival. According to a 2018 health ministry report titled 'Tribal Health in India', under-five mortality rate among ST dropped 58 per cent – from 135 in 1988 to 57 in 2014. However, percentage of excess under-five mortality in ST has more than doubled, up from 21 per cent to 48 per cent in the same time period.

Infant mortality has also been on a consistent decline, down to 44.4 in 2014 (NFHS 4) to from 90.5 per 1,000 births in 1988 (NFHS 1) . However, there is a caveat.

The 2018 tribal health report added:

When compared to other populations, it was observed that though the absolute level of IMR in tribal population in India has nearly halved over a quarter century, the gap with the favourable social groups has widened from 10 per cent to 38 per cent. The prevalence of stunting, wasting and underweight in ST population improved only marginally between 1998-1999 and 2007-2008, according to a 2009 report by the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB). The prevalence of stunting reduced to 56 per cent from 58 per cent, wasting came down to 22 per cent from 23 per cent while underweight came down to 52 per cent from 57 in the same time period.

By 2013-2014, according to the Rapid Survey on Children, these figures improved some more – 42.3 per cent of tribal children under five were stunted, 18.7 per cent were wasted and 36.7 per cent were underweight. Prevalence of obesity and overweight in adults doubled, up to 7 per cent from 3.6 per cent for men, and to 8 per cent from 4 per cent for women between 1998-1999 and 2008-2008, the NNMB report showed. These two health conditions are also considered forms of malnutrition by the World Health Organization (WHO).

However, even these figures give only a partial understanding of what the true health condition of India's tribal community is. Most surveys take STs as one identifier but many communities self-identify as Adivasis, even if they are not listed in the list of STs. These populations are typically forest-associated communities in central and southern India.

There are also urban and rural ST communities which form a large proportion of the ST category in states like Karnataka.

Health indicator disparities exist between forest-associated and the relatively rural / urban ST groups, with the former being grossly marginalised, Prashanth N Srinivas, a researcher working on tribal health inequities at the Institute of Public Health in Bengaluru, told DTE. "The ST indicators in national surveys is an average of both," he added. Indicators will be even worse if disaggregated by tribes which we don't have in India, the expert said.

12. FIRs, Demolitions & Distress: No End To The Daily Struggles Of Tribal Communities In Jammu & Kashmir

Forest dwellers in the union territory wait for long delayed laws as new challenges threaten their traditional way of life

Imtiyaz Ahmed, 35, doesn't have a faintest idea as to when his ancestors made the sprawling Yousmarg pasture in Kashmir's Badgam district their home. His neighbors, also traditional forest dwellers, are equally ignorant. But the local tourism development authority, which came into existence only a few years ago, has prohibited them from repairing their homes made of mud, stone and wood. Worried about their dilapidated shelters, they fear that they may soon be rendered homeless after the worn-out structures collapse.

"Where will we go if our houses collapse? We have been denied permission to change the old and decaying wooden logs or rebuild our houses," Imtiyaz tells Outlook. "The tourism authority wants us to leave this place."



A Bakarwal family

According to them, when Gulmarg and Sonamarg in the valley and Patnitop in Jammu region made it to the tourism map, all the local forest dwellers, mainly Gujjars and Bakarwals, were driven out almost similarly. The twin tribal communities constitute 11.9 percent of Jammu and Kashmir's total population, as per Census 2011.

The revocation of Articles 370 and 35 A had paved way for the implementation of two significant central legislations – The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, also called Forest Rights Act, and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act. Though the delimitation commission has recently reserved at least nine assembly seats for tribal communities in the union territory assembly, several new challenges have started to threaten their traditional way of life.

13. Forest Dwellers Of J&K And The Long Wait For Justice



With no access to the majority of forest areas, and shrinking of grazing lands, nomadic herders like Gujjars and Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir are finding themselves locked in conflict with local communities.

When the state of Jammu and Kashmir was dismantled in August 2019, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party had projected the region's biggest ethnic and tribal groups – Gujjars and Bakarwals – as among the biggest beneficiaries of the government's move. But more than two years later, the most marginalized and vulnerable population in the Union Territory seems to have little joy to share.

Due to poor implementation of the two legislations – The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, also called Forest Rights Act, and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act – traditional forest dwellers continue to bear the brunt of anti-encroachment drives undertaken by the police, wildlife, forest, and authorities. The J&K High Court has also been found indifferent to these two legislations in some instances.

The police cases have been piling up against poor communities, and the government functionaries continue to have the same hostile attitude towards them. With no access to the majority of forest areas, and shrinking of grazing lands, the nomadic herders are finding themselves locked in conflict with local communities. It is becoming increasingly difficult for them to migrate through traditional routes due to stiff opposition from local residents. On highways, they face a double threat.

While traveling with cattle herds poses a greater risk to their lives and livestock due to vehicular traffic, the community members are frequently booked on charges of bovine smuggling. They are also targeted by cow vigilante groups. Following the Kathua rape case, the twin communities have seen boycott calls against them and a growing number of attacks, especially in districts like Kathua, Samba, Udhampur, Jammu and Rajouri. The gradual decline of the local handicraft industry has denied remunerative prices for the wool of sheep and goats.

14. TN govt grants permission to Irula tribe to catch snakes for supplying venom



The Irula Snake Catcher's Industrial Cooperative Society has also been given permission to sell Rs 54 lakh worth of snake venom.

Those belonging to the Irula community, have been granted permission to catch snakes by the Tamil Nadu government, on Monday, March 28. The Forest department has granted permission to the community, which falls under the Scheduled Tribes category. Irulas, who are expert snake charmers and catchers, are part of the Irula Snake Catcher's Industrial Cooperative Society which has also been given permission to sell Rs 54 lakh worth of snake venom.

Chief Wildlife Warden Syed Muzzamil Abbas issued sale permits of the venom of 224 grams in the possession of the cooperative society. This society was the leading supplier of snake venom in the country with an annual turnover of Rs 4

crore but with the Forest Department not granting permission to catch snakes, the sales and profits from the venom had dwindled.

In the financial year 2021-22, the Irula cooperative society had managed sales of venom to the tune of Rs 30 lakh only, and the functioning of the society constituted in 1978 was almost crippled. However, the state government order issued on Monday has brought major relief to the community.

The Irulas were permitted to catch around 13,000 snakes annually but of late, the state Forest Department prevented the community from catching snakes and reduced the numbers to 5,000 which affected their business drastically. Officials with the Irula Snake Catchers Industrial Society said that the Madras High Court had granted the society permission to catch 13,000 snakes a year to extract venom but the Forest Department had been preventing this for the past few years.

The society officials said that in 2021 also, they were allowed to catch only 5,000 snakes and this led to the business of selling snake venom coming down drastically. The society, according to officials, at present, has the venom of spectacled cobras and Russell's vipers but the anti-venom-making companies require the venom of common krait and saw-scaled vipers also.

The Irula society is the only authorised supplier of venom for the production of anti-venom medicines and if the society's functioning is crippled, it would lead to companies depending on unauthorised venom suppliers. The pursuit by the Irula society officials with the Tamil Nadu Forest Department has led to the granting of permission for the society to catch snakes as well as to supply venom to anti-venom-making companies.

Studies have revealed that around 58,000 people die in the country due to snake bites a year and without an adequate supply of snake venom, anti-venom medicines cannot be made. This has now led to the Tamil Nadu Forest Department sanctioning permission for the society to catch snakes and extract venom as also to sell the stock of venom it has.

The Irula community had shot into the spotlight after the release of the film *Jai Bhim*, which projected the struggles faced by the community.

15. Chhattisgarh's Gond tribe decides to bury dead to save trees



A 'constitution' was prepared by the Gond community that also included a ban on dowry.

The Gond tribe in Chhattisgarh has decided to bury their dead instead of cremating them to save trees. The decision was made in a two-day Gond Mahasammelan which was held in Kabirdham district between March 6-7.

The Gond leaders also passed a proposal which banned the consumption of alcohol in social gathering and marriage ceremonies. The Mahasammelan decided that a fine will be imposed if the rules are violated.

A 'constitution' was prepared by the Gond community that also included a ban on dowry.

"The Gond tribals worship 'Prakriti' (Nature) hence we always try to save nature. Trees are cut and are being used for making pyres which is unnecessary and misuse of wood. Actually, Gonds started cremating bodies in the last few years but Mitti-Sanskaar (burying) was our tradition hence the community decided to include burying in our constitution," said BPS Netam, president of Sarv Adivasi Samaj Chhattisgarh.

Netam further claimed that Gonds of Bastar are still burying the body but in plain of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh some people, under the influence of other communities, have started cremating.

As per the experts in many places of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, the Gonds bury the dead and erect a stone memorial, which describes the good deeds of the deceased.

“These stones are still found in the villages of Bastar and some parts of Chhattisgarh. The decision to bury instead of cremating the deceased was taken earlier also in meetings and we are looking forward that the community will follow it,” Netam added.

Hundreds of Gonds representatives from across the state and bordering Madhya Pradesh attended the Mahasammelan.

According to 2011, the total tribal population in the state is 78,22,902, which is around 30.60 of the state’s population. Gonds are among the most populated tribals in Chhattisgarh in plains and Maoist-hit Bastar region.

Naval Singh Mandavi, President of Gondwana Gond Mahasabha, who attended the Mahasammelan claimed that the aim is to return back to rituals.

“As far dowry is concerned, in our community there is no such concept... We have to pay “Vadhu Mulya” , in which the groom’s family has to contribute for the expenses of the bride family. But some people started taking it hence Mahasabha has decided to ban the dowry,” said Mandavi.

Explaining the ban on liquor consumption in marriage ceremonies and social gatherings of the Gond community, Mandavi said: “Though, ‘Mahua sharaab’ is in our tradition but the youth have started consuming excessive liquor... We have decided that only five people who will perform the rituals will consume liquor,” said Mandavi.

16. Ex-IAS Officer Uses Craft of Weaving Baskets to Help 300 Tribal Families Fight Poverty



For 50 odd years, no government officer or minister visited us, and if not for Suchitra madam, our tribe would have probably been extinct,” says Ajay Sabar, a tribal from Burudih village.

The 50-year-old belongs to the Sabar tribe, one of the most primitive and endangered tribes listed among the 32 that exist in Jharkhand. “We were struggling to survive and had no land to farm, nor houses to live in but bamboo huts in the forests. We made a meagre earning of Rs 1,500 to Rs 2,000 a month,” he says.

This is not the story of Ajay alone but 300 plus families from 25 villages who live about 60 km from Jamshedpur, the capital city of Jharkhand.

The tribe was listed among the 68 de-notified languished communities by the British for their insubordination towards them. The tribe was declared as ‘criminal’ under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. Years of neglect made their end seem near as the tribals were at the mercy of dwindling forest resources and donations.

Today, they are not only surviving but thriving. All thanks to compassion and years of hard work by Suchitra Sinha, a former IAS officer.

In 1988, Suchitra cleared the Bihar Public Service Commission examination and, since she belonged to the region, she was aware of the underdeveloped area and the plight the locals suffered daily. The region was also known for Naxal rebels.

The gritty young girl, who studied to become an IAS officer, joined as a deputy collector at Jamshedpur in 1996, which was a turning point in her life.

“A few members of Bharat Seva Sangha paid a visit to my office seeking donations for Sabar Tribes, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). They informed me that the tribals were in a dire state and would die of hunger if adequate donations were not received,” she says.

Suchitra was intrigued by the news and decided to visit the Nimdih block located in Saraikela district, now a part of Jharkhand.

“I saw the tribals living in abject poverty and were dependent on forest resources. The children did not have clothes to wear, and families struggled to make ends meet. “The situation was no different to other 216 families in the area,” she recalls.

Suchitra decided to find a way to improve the lives of the residents. “I learned that the tribals weaved baskets and brooms from palm, date, bamboo plants and kanji grass. The artisans sold them at Rs 30 each. The tribals earned barely Rs 2,000/month,” she says.

Moved by their economic condition, Suchitra decided to work towards their betterment. She released funds under the tribal schemes to encourage and generate livelihoods in poultry, food and other areas.

But she felt the need to put in more effort for them. She approached the then Deputy Development Commissioner (DDC), explaining the condition of tribals and sought support. However, the official refused their request and doubted if the tribal community could be lifted out of poverty by her efforts alone.

Though disheartened, Suchitra refused to give up on the community and visited Samarpur village in the block, encouraging men and women to continue weaving baskets.

In 1993, she was transferred to Delhi. On one occasion from her return trip to the village, Suchitra brought a traditional basket made by a tribal. “I gifted it to the then Handicraft Development Commissioner and explained about the Sabar tribe and their conditions. He was impressed by the artistic and creative product and assigned five projects to mould their skills,” she adds.

Suchitra roped in five designers from the National Institute of Fashion Design (NIFT), Delhi, and asked them to visit hamlets to train the tribals.

Apart from Samanpur, the residents from Bereda, Bindubeda, Chirubeda, Bhangad, Biridudih, Makula, and others received the training. "I formed a self-help group of the villagers, and they took the training in groups of 10. The trainers did not know local languages, and it was vice-versa with the tribals. But a month-long training helped them bond. It also helped them improve the quality of the products and added varieties to the handicraft items," she says, adding the trained tribals later shared their learnings with others in the villages.

The artisans now could make about 104 items, including planters, bags, paper holders files, lampshades and more. In 2002, Suchitra then formed the NGO Ambalika to promote the artisans. Suchitra took the artisans, groomed them and asked them to stay at her place in Delhi. "I invited them to Delhi to participate in the handicraft exhibitions and provided them a platform to sell their products," she says.

Suchitra says they received significant recognition in exhibitions, but the tribals faced difficulty bagging government and corporate orders. "Nevertheless, we did not miss any opportunity that came our way, and slowly the tribals got more business as their network grew stronger. However, the Naxal activity increased by 2005, and my initiative took a backseat. Slowly, the connection with the tribals dwindled, and we stopped working entirely," she says.

The situation stabilised around 2010, and Suchitra made another visit to the villages. "I learned about the India International Trade Fair scheduled for 2011 and immediately connected with a few tribals, requesting them to participate," she says.

17. Tribes tell their own stories of celestial bodies



Research finds that Gond, Korku, Kolam and Banjara myths show an alternative view of the stars and the universe

Astronomy has benefited from amateur efforts, including myths that seek to explain astronomical phenomena. That is true for tribal lore too, researchers have found.

A study of tribal people settled around central India has revealed a rich mythology. Researchers led by Mayank Vahia, Professor, Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai, carried out the largest study of its kind (ongoing, since 2014) to collect and document tribal myths, with the participation of over a thousand people from the Gond, Kolam, Korku, Banjara and Cholaikkan tribes. Participants identified images of the night sky and narrated stories that were documented.

“Modern education is forcing us to learn only one narrative. However, there are parallel traditions, perceptions and narratives of our relationship with nature,” says Mr. Vahia.

The stories have a lasting appeal beyond the rational. A popular example is the Hindu myth of Rahu and Ketu, asuras or demons who devour the sun and the moon, causing eclipses, which continues to fascinate many though eclipses are well-understood.

The researchers found that the tribal view of constellations and myths of the origin of the universe is quite different from what Babylonian or Hindu

stargazers perceived. For instance, the Gond look at the Southern Cross (Crux) and see a mahua tree.

Gond village.

The Korkus have an interesting myth on the Centaurus constellation. Some prominent stars in Centaurus are the Menkent, the fourth brightest star in the constellation, and the Hadar, which is actually a three-star system and the second brightest object in it. In the Korku myth, one of them, Pechla (the tribal name for Menkent) did not pay his bride's family any dowry.

So his wife Charkhaya (the star Hadar) ate betel leaves, which stained her mouth red, and she then spat it on Pechla, some juice staining her cheeks as well. The myth underlines the importance of not defaulting on the bridal gift. The Korku also identify the stars with earthly counterparts. For instance, they identify Pechla with the red-vented bulbul and Charkhaya with the red-whiskered bulbul.

Korku creation myth

The Korku believe that Badadeo (a Korku god, thought to be the equivalent of Shiva) sent out a crow to bring back some soil. While it was returning, some soil fell from the crow's beak and became the earth. Out of this, Badadeo created men and women. To guard them, Gangudevi, his wife and a great goddess herself, created dogs.

But having given them life, there was a dilemma – the men and women, being all siblings, could not intermarry. So Badadeo called up a huge storm and everyone hid behind objects like rock, river, tree, crops and waited for it to pass. There were twelve-and-a-half such objects, the half-object corresponding to transgenders. When the storm subsided, their identities changed and Badadeo gave each person a name based on where they had taken shelter from the storm; the people who had hidden behind different objects could intermarry.

Tribal communities have been very closely knit, to the point of marrying only within their own tribes but also exchanging ideas, even myths, strictly within their own clan. So much so that if there were settlements of different tribes across a road, each would have a different mythology, Dr. Vahia and co-workers found.

The Saptarshi Mandal or the Big Dipper – this mainly has seven stars, four at the corners of an imaginary polygon and three bright spots trailing a distance away along a curve – is an asterism, or subset, of the larger constellation Ursa Major or Big Bear.

The Saptarshi Mandal is close to the Pole Star and rises in the north. It is visible today for most of the year in the night sky when viewed from, say, Nagpur, the vantage point of the people the researchers spoke with, and this asterism would set and rise regularly. But about 3,000 years ago, these stars would not set below the horizon. In other words, the Saptarshi used to be circumpolar. There is an interesting myth about the setting of Saptarshi, which can be interpreted as an ancient memory of the Gond.

Thieves and a cot

The Gond call the four stars forming the polygon, Katul, or cot, and they see the trailing spots as thieves trying to steal the cot. They envisage an old lady on the cot who must not go to sleep, as thieves would then steal the cot.

Dr. Vahia has an interesting interpretation of this story. He thinks that that the implication of the belief that the “lady must not go to sleep” is that the constellation should not set. He, therefore, feels that the story suggests a reference to observations over 3,000 years ago.

The Korku tribe, on the other hand, talk explicitly of the setting of the Saptarshi. In their story too, the polygon represents a bed. But instead of the old woman, the workers sleeping on the bed must wake up early and start work.

According to the Korku, the cot is not a proper rectangle because the thieves are tugging at it.

The researchers have published a part of their findings in the Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage. Their further work has been accepted for publication by Current Science.

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



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.

Desia Koraput is the brain child of Yugabrata Kar, a travel entrepreneur. Before venturing into the travel industry, having visited remote villages as part of his

job as a Sales Engineer with a reputed organization, Yugabrata noticed abject poverty on account of the dwindling demand of traditional sources of livelihood. Another problem, as is true in all parts of rural India, is the decline of tradition and culture because of the aspirational value attached to moving to cities and getting jobs there. And the introduction of technology such as television and mobile phones, though it brings information, also dilutes the local culture.

Determined to bring about a change, Yugabrata decided to introduce the concept of responsible eco-tourism with a focus on promoting local culture as an attraction for travellers. Thus was born Desia in 2014 to empower local tribal communities by providing livelihood, and encouraging them to keep their arts and crafts alive by promoting them at Desia.

Because of the increasing footfalls of travellers to Desia, the community has benefitted indirectly too. Two local men bought a 4-wheeler vehicle to take the travellers around. Some took up the role of guides for the travellers and so they have an additional income now.

Tribal women, especially those of the Bonda tribe, are known to wear colourful jewellery. To also encourage them to pursue this as a livelihood, an artist was invited from Shantiniketan to teach the local tribal women to create different kinds of jewellery using naturally found material such as seeds, shells, etc.

There is also a quaint 'Noni shop' at Desia run by the staff, which sells local, natural and handmade products such as lentils, turmeric, legumes, handloom textile, honey etc. which are grown by the farmers and local weavers. The products are of premium quality and are pure and natural.

But his massive project was not without its share of challenges. The location is extremely remote and wasn't attractive to investors. And due to the constant clashes between the Naxalites and police personnel, the project got delayed by a few years. Also, he had to build trust in the local tribals and present a vision that they could share and participate in.

Eight years on, the Desia project is doing well and the local people have a sense of pride in what they do. That gives Yugabrata immense satisfaction. His goal is to replicate the eco-tourism model of Desia at other locations like Deomali which will attract travellers and further empower locals of that area.

19. I Left City Life for an Odisha Village; Here's What I Learned About Sustainable Cooking



As you make your way through Western Odisha along the Koraput belt, near Rayagada, to the Niyamgiri Hills, the trees around you will start getting dense. The location, though remote, is one that holds an entirely different world within it.

If you visit the forest area at sunset, a novel sight will greet you — a cluster of tribal folk wrapping up their day that began in the wee hours of the morning with farming. It is now their leisure time, and they spend it engaging in folk music, while the aroma of smoked meat wafts through the air.

This is the Dongria Kondha tribe, one of the 62 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of India (PVTG), classified by the Constitution as being completely dependent on forest produce.

In one of the remotest areas in the country, where one wouldn't expect to find many city folk, in the midst of the tribes sits 35-year-old Kavya Saxena. She chats with the people around her, calls them by name, and appears to have known them for years. She has.

For Kavya, it has been a long day too. While her role here involves being a bridge between the tribes and city markets, helping the former find buyers, she says her work extends beyond that.

While she now resides in the Niyamgiri Hills, in a forest on the border of Odisha and Chhattisgarh, and is associated closely with the Dongria Kondha and Bonda tribes, she had never imagined this would be her life.

Sustainable Cooking: 'One day, I decided to leave the city behind'

It's 2018. At a major fashion house in Gurugram, Kavya is wrapping up a meeting. She has calls to make, executive decisions to take, and trends to set, but what she's really looking forward to is her upcoming vacation.

Kavya, you see, has an interesting hobby.

"People love going to beaches and scenic locations, but no one visits rural India as they feel these areas might be unclean. I loved discovering what these villages had to offer, and would frequent them sometimes as a hobby and other times as part of work."

In October 2020, this love for villages would turn into a solo project. Through #KavyaOnQuest, she would explore the villages of India and document their crafts. She planned to carry it on for a few months before she'd have to return to her job.

In July 2021, when it was time to embrace city life once again, Kavya decided not to. After 12 years of being in corporate leadership roles, she realised it was time to listen to her calling.

It has been a year now that Kavya has found a home in India's remotest areas, and she sums up her unique experience in one line.

"Every day is new, every day is interesting."

Once she made this decision to leave her city life behind, the next challenge was deciding which tribal area she wanted to move to.

As she grew up in Rajasthan, she always thought it would be easiest to move back there. "But through my travels and project, I got a sense that Eastern India too has great tribal heritage, and so I decided upon Odisha."

"I wouldn't go as far to say that I have adopted them," she says. "They have adopted me."

Sustainable Cooking: Of food and flavour

During her time with the tribes, Kavya realised that the food and practices that surround their dishes are unique. While some are focused on dietary

requirements, other dishes have cultural significance. “I love the food for its simplicity,” she says, adding that all the dishes are curated with the purpose of giving them energy.

“The people here are engaged in a lot of agriculture and farming, and this expends muscle power. Whether it is their fermented liquors or their rice, it is aimed at giving them the energy to work.”

1. Badi Chura

This food is prevalent across Odisha, explains Kavya. She adds that in the Niyamgiri Hills, 47 varieties of rice are grown, including kala jeera. These different kinds are ground and mixed with spices to form what is known as ‘badis’.

2. Apong (rice liquor) / aara (millet liquor)

In Arunachal Pradesh – where Kavya represents native tribes through her role as president of Rural WICCI (Women In Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry) – the Adi, Nyishi, Galo and Monpa tribes burn rice husk or millets. The resulting product is then fermented to produce the apong or the aara.

3. Handiya

This is liquor made by the Bonda, Gadaba and Kondha tribes in Chhattisgarh and Odisha, by fermenting rice. While the liquor in Arunachal is more refined due to the burning process, this liquor is cruder.

Crafting a livelihood for the tribes

Alongside the culinary practices of these tribes, Kavya has also learned a lot from the handicrafts and art. She assists them in selling their hard work through her platform Craftpotli, which she started in 2019. The group is now also working on FSSAI licensing for agricultural products.

Kavya is working with the Dongria Kondha tribes to revive a textile known as the ‘kapadagandha’. This is a traditional shawl, with triangles representing the Niyamgiri Hills and motifs representing the tribal huts and is worn by the women of the tribe.

It has an interesting story behind it.

“The sister weaves this and gives it to her brother when it’s completed. The brother then gifts it to the girl they want to marry,” explains Kavya.

However, while the weaving and embroidery would earlier be done by the tribal women, the craft started to die out, says Kavya. This was because of the number of fakes that have clouded the market.

“We have now established a system where the block development officer evenly distributes the orders among the women. This regular inflow of orders ensures the motivation to weave is constant, and there is a steady source of income. It also helps the girls stay in touch with their craft,” she says.

Kavya says 70 per cent of the revenue earned from selling these products goes to the artisans, and 30 per cent goes to Craftpotli for logistics, packing, and transport.

Tripti, a member of the Kondha tribe, says, “My mother, in whose kitchen a lot of work has been done for Craftpotli, feels so proud. It has also got the village women to come together and chat in the evenings as they make these products. I feel very proud and happy.”

20. Tribal Women from Odisha’s Kashipur Block Are Standing up against Exploitation - One Broom at a Time



For many tribal women in Odisha’s Kashipur block in the Rayagada district, making and selling brooms is the primary source of income and livelihood.

Exploited and taken advantage of, the women finally decided to take matters into their own hands to secure their futures.

Salpai Majhi, a proud and confident tribal woman leader, has a wonderful story to tell, "Since ages, we have depended on the forest to run our homes. We have been collecting grass from the forest and making brooms that have been a valuable source of income, particularly when our men cannot find work as labourers on the nearby farms. But, until some years back, we were compelled to sell the brooms at a meagre price to the middlemen and petty traders who came to us. Then we decided to take things into our own hands and we fought hard to get our due recognition and secure our rights. This became possible only through Ama Sangathan."

For generations, men in the adivasi families living in and around Kashipur block in Odisha's Rayagada district have worked as labourers while the womenfolk have trudged into the dense forests to collect grass which they use to make brooms. Until a decade ago, the women quietly did all the back-breaking work and then simply handed over the finished product to the exploitative middlemen and traders who offered them a pittance whilst making good money themselves.

Since agriculture around these parts is mostly rain-fed, keeping the home fires burning during the off-season has always been a tough call for women. Whereas gathering and selling Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) is what keeps them going, it comes with its share of hard work and heartaches. It takes days of walking and climbing steep hillocks before they have enough grass to make brooms, and this is followed by hours spent on cleaning, stacking and fashioning the actual brooms. Earlier, they would have to sell the entire stock to the traders backed by the Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation (TDCC). The TDCC, mandated to protect the tribals, would strike deals with traders and middlemen to conduct business on its behalf.

Adding to their difficulties were the forest officials whose high-handed attitude was not easy to handle. A disgruntled Sukri Majhi, another vocal AMS member, shares, "We have legitimate rights over the forest produce as we have been living here since generations. However, there was a time when the officials would demand their share out of our collections. I remember once when, about a decade ago, a few of us had collected grass and kept it in our huts. The ranger came to us with some middlemen and they threatened to take everything away. They forcibly took our entire collection for just 50 paise to Rs. 2 for a bundle."

Incidents like these were not uncommon, but, eventually, they paved the way for the women to stand up for themselves. The women slowly realised that the middlemen and traders were indiscriminately exploiting them. They received support from Agramee, a local NGO that has been working to empower tribal communities for nearly 30 years. The change started with the formation of Mahila Mandals at the panchayat level.

These groups allowed the women to discuss their problems and mutual concerns while learning about rights and entitlements. With new-found knowledge they found a voice, and decided to challenge the authorities. As they were together in this, no one was scared of the consequences of these confrontations. Ultimately, the Mahila Mandals joined hands to form a block-level organisation, the Ama Sangathan. It aimed to break the traders-TDCC nexus and claim their right to collect, process, and market the grass brooms.

It took three long years of persistent campaigning, with endless rounds of writing petitions. There were threats of arrests for false cases regarding stocking of brooms declared illegal by the Forest Department. The women even had their entire stock seized. Eventually, met the then State Chief Minister to share their point of view, before there were any tangible results. Then on April 1, 2000, there was a major breakthrough. The Chief Minister announced the de-nationalisation of 60 items on the NTFPs list, including the brooms.

Satisfied with the way their movement shaped up and became a means for tribal women to gain agency, Gunjli Naik of Mandibisi panchayat says, "Our struggle was not futile. We fought very hard. Many of us faced court cases and were threatened with dire consequences if we didn't leave Ama Sangathan. But we never gave up on our dream. We are a 1,200-member strong group, and from the very beginning we have stood firmly by each other. We knew it may take long, but we would get due recognition for our rights."

The NTFPs policy-change has had a real impact on the lives of the tribals. It has ended the domination of the middlemen over trade in the area, as well as increased people's bargaining power. In fact, Agramee stepped in to show them how they could improve the quality of their product to improve marketability. Previously, they would take the grass and roughly bind it together. But, with simple training, they learnt how to clean the stalks properly and bind it with a fine finish. Consequently, prices of the brooms increased by 300 %, making broom-making a viable alternative to slaving for contractors. Now, the group is doing well, and retailing its product in neighbouring states as

well.

However, in spite of acknowledging how far they have come, Sushila Majhi, Secretary, Ama Sangathan, injects a note of caution. She says, “Our group still has a long way to go. We may have secured our forest rights and bettered our economic status, but much work must be done to secure future generations. We have demanded that a government school with full-time teachers be set up in our area to ensure our children get a fair opportunity to study.” Additionally, the Sangathan has been backing women to claim their rightful space in the panchayat. Ghasen Jhodia says, “The Sangathan women openly talk about women playing a greater role in the running of the panchayat and exercising their political rights. We work to run our households and we are bringing in good money. So why can’t we extend our presence in public life?”

21. How an Engineer Transformed a Tribal Hamlet in Odisha into a Unique Eco-Tourism Destination



In Odisha’s scenic Koraput Valley, a quiet transformation is underway. Yugabrata Kar and his community-centric ecotourism initiative, Desia, are bringing the benefits of sustainable livelihoods to the local tribes living in the valley.

An avid traveller, Kar grew up in the holy city of Puri, which attracts a large number of tourists from across the globe. After completing his graduation in mechanical engineering, he chose to study tourism and hospitality management to pursue his interest. However, his first job was as tour operator followed by the post of a sales engineer for a reputed company that required him to travel to sleepy hamlets to sell agricultural pumps.

It was during his visits to these remote villages that Kar noticed two things – one, that the unique tribal culture of the region was getting eroded due to technology explosion, and second, the locals who followed traditional sources of livelihood rarely emerged from abject poverty. Lack of alternative modes of livelihood has also led to large-scale migration of youth to other states as labourers in brick kilns and construction sites.

Deciding to do something to help them, Kar drew upon his training in rural tourism and experience as a tour operator to set up an ecotourism facility at Lamtaput in Koraput Valley. He chose the concept of ecotourism because its principles entailed the conservation of environment as well as the preservation of local cultures and traditions, while providing education and economic benefits to locals.

Kar financed the project, which he named Desia, with his accumulated savings, supplemented with a loan from Bank of Baroda. Other than arranging funds for the project, he also had to tackle several other hurdles during the initial days. Other than ensuring connectivity to the remote location, the biggest challenge he faced was winning the trust of the tribals

Knowing that the involvement of the local communities was crucial if the venture was to succeed, Kar began engaging with them extensively through participatory camps. Ten local Paraja tribe youth were trained in hospitality and tourism nuances to run daily operations. Pre-schools were established to give children a strong foundation and get more families involved. Kar also roped in experts to train the local women in making handicrafts and traditional jewellery, which could then be sold to tourists.



Slowly but steadily, Kar ensured that the venture was almost entirely managed by locals. From construction to daily operations, he also shared a substantial percentage of profits with them, other than using the money to sponsor skill development scholarships for the local youth. Today, Kar has the full cooperation and trust of the local communities who have seen their lives improve due to his efforts.

Spread over four acres of the Koraput valley, Desia provides a quintessential Odisha experience backed by the warm hospitality of the local community, an age-old tribal culture and the pristine landscape. The ecotourism facility is equipped with modern amenities and spacious rooms decorated with local handicrafts and traditional tribal motifs. Local artists, with help and guidance from artists from Shantiniketan, have designed the entire set-up.

Working towards achieving a listing in the Tourism Concern's Ethical Travel Guide, Desia aims at being an offbeat travel experience for visitors while revitalizing the livelihood traditions and the economic well-being of tribal families. This is why Desia welcomes tourists who would like to lend a helping hand in terms of capacity building and skill development for the locals.

Tourists also have a chance to absorb the local culture, learn tribal arts and crafts in workshops and participate in festivals besides trekking, hiking or cycling in the picturesque valley. Food at Desia is served on tree leaves and includes tribal delicacies such as mandia jau (ragi gruel) and baunsa kadi sabji

(bamboo shoots curry)

Very popular among international 'voluntourists', Desia has also caught the imagination of the native population of Odisha. Local tourists, who wish to explore the Koraput valley and its rural landscape along with enjoying the hospitality and company of tribals, often head to Desia for the weekend.

Desia's success has also reminded the state government about the potential of eco-tourism to help marginalised communities. Besides starting a centralised online system for accommodation booking at ecotourist spots, the tourism department has decided to develop basic amenities such as accommodation facilities in and around 60 ecotourism sites across the state.

Delighted about the government's plan, Kar feels that such eco-tourism spots will be a win-win situation for both the tribals and the tourists. While tourists will be able to savour a unique cultural experience, increased footfalls will translate into more socio-economic benefits for the locals. Thus, the principles of responsible tourism will be adhered to in letter and spirit.

22. Forest rights act failed to deliver justice to tribals

- There is a surge in demand by forest communities to not only access the resources of their habitat, but also to establish their ownership over forests as forest rights act in not meeting its objective. Residents of 18 villages in **Chhattisgarh's Udanti Sitanadi Tiger Reserve** blocked the busy National Highway 130C.

What tribal people say?

- "We need forest resources for survival. Being a tiger reserve, we already lead a life with many restrictions. There is no power supply, access to grazing lands is non-existent and we cannot undertake construction works," says Arjun Nayak of Nagesh, one of the 18 villages in Gariaband district.

What is forest rights act 2006?

- The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 recognizes the rights of the forest dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, on which these communities were dependent for a variety of needs, including livelihood, habitation and other socio-cultural needs.
- It aimed to protect the marginalised socio-economic class of citizens and balance the right to environment with their right to life and livelihood.



What are individual rights under FRA act?

- The Act encompasses Rights of Self-cultivation and Habitation which are usually regarded as Individual rights.

What are community forest rights under FRA act?

- Community Rights as Grazing, Fishing and access to Water bodies in forests, Habitat Rights for PVTGs, Traditional Seasonal Resource access of Nomadic and Pastoral community, access to biodiversity, community right to intellectual property and traditional knowledge, recognition of traditional customary rights and right to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community forest resource for sustainable use.

Case study / Value addition

Chargaon village, Dhamtari district, Chhattisgarh

Migration has drastically reduced due to economic benefits after getting CFRR. Success in improving quality of tendu leaves with better management practices, increasing income.

Issues with Forest rights act

- **Non responsive states:** The forest rights claims of these tribes and forest-dwellers are mostly rejected by the States.
- **Improper claims:** Being poor and illiterate, living in remote areas, they do not know the appropriate procedure for filing claims.
- **Low awareness:** The gram sabhas, which initiate the verification of their claims, are low on awareness of how to deal with them.



Why are forest rights important for tribals?

- **Justice:** Aimed at undoing the “historic injustice” meted out to forest-dependent communities due to curtailment of their customary rights over forests, the FRA came into force in 2008.
- **Livelihood:** It is important as it recognises the community’s right to use, manage and conserve forest resources, and to legally hold forest land that these communities have used for cultivation and residence.
- **Conservation:** It also underlines the integral role that forest dwellers play in the sustainability of forests and in the conservation of biodiversity.

Conclusion

Despite the contentious and debatable nature of this law, the importance and necessity of the FRA, 2006 can not be negated completely. The law assumes even

more significant importance when the country is a developing economy and is full-fledged following the path of capitalism, thus making it even more substantial to provide a redressal mechanism for vulnerable and marginalised communities and groups, such as the Adivasis and the other similar tribes, from the necessary evil of development and infrastructural growth while also safeguarding their traditions, heritage and identity that forms an important part of the nation's cultural diversity as well.