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PAPER -1

PHYSICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Over 57,000 Years Old - Scientists Discover Oldest Known Neanderthal Cave Engravings



Finger marks on a cave wall in France were created prior to the arrival of *Homo sapiens* in the region.

According to a recent study published in the journal *PLOS ONE* by Jean-Claude Marquet and colleagues from the University of Tours, France, the oldest engravings made by Neanderthals have been discovered on a cave wall in France.

Over the past few decades, research has shed light on the cultural sophistication of Neanderthals. However, our understanding of their symbolic and artistic expression remains limited.

Only a short list of symbolic productions is attributed to Neanderthals, and the interpretation of these is often the subject of debate. In this study, Marquet and colleagues identified markings on a cave wall in France as the oldest known Neanderthal engravings.

The cave is La Roche-Cotard in the Centre-Val de Loire of France, where a series of non-figurative markings on the wall are interpreted as finger-flutings, marks made by human hands.

The researchers made a plotting analysis and used photogrammetry to create 3D models of these markings, comparing them with known and experimental human markings. Based on the shape, spacing, and arrangement of these engravings, the team concluded that they are deliberate, organized, and intentional shapes created by human hands.

The team also dated cave sediments with optically-stimulated luminescence dating, determining that the cave became closed off by infilling sediment around 57,000 years ago, well before *Homo sapiens* became established in the region.

This, combined with the fact that stone tools within the cave are only Mousterian, a technology associated with Neanderthals, is strong evidence that these engravings are the work of Neanderthals.

Because these are non-figurative symbols, the intent behind them is unclear. They are, however, of a similar age with cave engravings made by *Homo sapiens* in other parts of the world. This adds to a growing body of evidence that the behavior and activities of Neanderthals were similarly complex and diverse as those of our own ancestors.

The authors add: “Fifteen years after the resumption of excavations at the La Roche-Cotard site, the engravings have been dated to over 57,000 years ago and, thanks to stratigraphy, probably to around 75,000 years ago, making this the oldest decorated cave in France, if not Europe!”

2. Endogamy may be the cause of the Persistence of harmful genetic variants in India



A study by **Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology**, Hyderabad has recently found causes of **cardiac failure** at **younger ages** in the **Indian** population.

- **Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA)** of such individuals lacked **25 base pairs** in a **gene** crucial for the **rhythmic beating** of the **heart** (scientists call it a **25 base-pair deletion**).

About 25 base pair deletions:

- 25 base pair deletion is a risk **allele** for late-onset **left ventricular (LV) dysfunction**, **hypertrophy**, and **heart failure**.

- A 25-base pair (25bp) deletion in the **MYBPC3** gene is enriched in **South Asians**, being **unique** to the **Indian** and **Southeast Asian** population and **not** found elsewhere.
- This affects about **4%** of the **Indian population**.

Key findings of the study:

Genetic differences among populations:

- Whole-genome sequencing of individuals from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh found **genetic differences** between people from different regions of the **subcontinent**.
- These genetic differences were even found at the level of **smaller geographies** within **India**.
- There was **little mixing** between individuals from **different communities**.
- **Endogamous practices** (including caste-based, region-based, and consanguineous marriages) in the subcontinent are responsible for such **conserved genetic patterns** at the community level.
- In ideal conditions, there would have been **random mating** in a **population**, leading to **greater genetic diversity** and **lower** frequency of **variants** linked to **disorders**.
- The **cultural aspects** of Indians might need mending to improve the population's health.

Homozygous genotypes:

- The South Indian and Pakistani sub-group showed a **higher frequency** of **homozygous genotypes**.
- Humans typically have **two copies** of **each gene**.
- When an individual has two copies of the **same variant**, it is called a **homozygous genotype**.
- Most **genetic variants** linked to **major disorders** are **recessive** in nature and show their effect only when present in **two copies**.
- **Heterozygous individuals** are at **lower** risk of getting affected by **genetic disorders**.

- The main cause of **homozygous** genetic composition is **inbreeding** or **consanguineous marriages** which is prevalent in South India and Pakistan.
- The South Asian cohort has a **higher number** of **variants** that could **disrupt** the **functioning of genes**, but there were also **unique variants** that were **not** found in **European** individuals.
 - These variants affect many **physiological parameters**, leading to a higher risk of cardiovascular disorders, diabetes, cancers, and mental disorders.

Indian genome mapping:

- **Human Genome Sequencing** was completed in **2003**.
- **African** and **Chinese** population gene sequencing has been done.
- As **India** has a **diverse population**, there is a **need for genome sequencing** of the Indian population for economic, matrimonial, and geographical reasons.
- The Genome India project has been launched in **2020** to sequence **10,000** Indian human genomes.
- The idea of **genetic puritanism** must be taken away to prevent major **hereditary disorders**.

About Human Genome Sequencing:

- The **Human Genome Project (HGP)** was an international scientific research project for determining the **base pairs** that make up **human DNA**, and identifying, mapping, and sequencing all of the genes of the human genome.
- It was **started in 1990** and was **completed in 2003**.
- The human genome has approximately **3.1 billion base pairs**.
- There are approximately **22,300 protein-coding genes** in human beings.

Significance of the study:

- The study of sequenced human genes was helpful to **identify** the **genetic variants** that **increase** the **risk** for common diseases like cancer and diabetes.
- The study has shown that **identifying unique genetic variants** can help develop **interventions** for major health concerns.

SOCIO – CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Combat or Climate: The Real Cause of Small-Scale Societies' Collapse



A new study concludes that social fragmentation and aggressive conflicts were instrumental in molding the population dynamics of early

farming society during the Neolithic period in Europe.

The enigma that researchers have been trying to decipher for years is why Neolithic farmer communities experience periods of rapid growth and decline, encompassing instances of “collapses” where entire regions are abandoned.

According to one common explanation, climate fluctuations are the main driver, but empirical tests do not fully support this claim. In a new paper, recently published in the journal *Scientific Reports*, Turchin and his team seem to have come up with a new piece of information.

Our study shows that periodic outbreaks of warfare – and not climate fluctuations – can account for the observed boom-bust patterns in the data,” argues Turchin, who’s a project leader at the Complexity Science Hub (CSH). The team tested the two rival theories attempting to explain these dynamics – climate change and social conflict – in computer simulations and compared the results with historical data. This is the first time an agent-based model has been applied to this scale for this period in history, pre-state, and pre-empire. The model covers most of the European continent and works with small units, such as independent villages. Previous simulations for this period have been conducted by dividing the area into a few large regions, but we wanted to examine interactions at the village level,” explains CSH scientist Dániel Kondor, who’s the first author of the study.

Change of heart

Turchin has been applying mathematical models of social integration and disintegration to analyze the rise and fall of complex societies, such as agrarian empires in history or modern nation-states. He admits he wasn’t convinced that such ideas would also apply to prehistory, such as the European Neolithic, where most of the time people lived in small-scale farming communities with no deep social

inequalities and limited political organization beyond local settlements.

“I confess that until recently I thought that such societies were quite resilient and not susceptible to social disintegration and collapse,” says Turchin. “There is no state or nobles to rebel against and, in any case, what’s there to ‘collapse’?” adds the complexity scientist.

Turchin, however, now holds a different view. Increasing evidence suggested that “simple” Neolithic farmers’ societies also collapsed. “In fact, such cases are much more profound than the social and political breakdown of more recent societies, because archaeology indicates that substantial regions were depopulated.”

Computer simulations

In the study, the researchers focused on the period from the first evidence of agriculture in Europe to the beginning of the Bronze Age – between 7000 BCE and 3000 BCE. The simulation begins with each small unit of the map either empty or occupied by a village of independent farmers. The simulation combines two components: population change in each unit based on climate variability during the time period; and interactions, which include populations in each unit splitting, migrating, or coming into conflict with each other.

The patterns created by the computer simulations were then compared to real-world data. A radiocarbon dating database was used by the team. “Archaeological data on settlements and Carbon-14 dating indicate boom and bust cycles. As settlement data are limited to a few regions and periods, we rely on Carbon-14 data in our model predictions,” explains Kondor.

Based on the study’s findings, climate variation is not capable of explaining boom-bust dynamics during the time period. In contrast, simulations taking into account the social conflict produced patterns similar to those observed in radiocarbon dating.

“Of course, we can’t prove that this is the only mechanism behind the population declines during that time period. There could be other [mechanisms], but we demonstrate that internal conflict producing population cycles is consistent with real-world data,” argues Kondor.

Intense times

The study presumes a complex social landscape in this time period. Such a notion is consistent with the results of intense archaeological research in Europe over the past century. “This period was indeed much more dynamic than non-specialists might think,” adds Kondo

Since we don’t see consistent large-scale political organization during this time, it would be easy to imagine that things were static, such that people settled in a village and lived there for three or four thousand years without much happening in between. That doesn’t seem to be the case. Sadly, this also means that this period was more violent than previously thought.”

“Many case studies have shown that early farming societies underwent socio-political cyclical dynamics from integration to disintegration. These social cycles run more or less parallel to population cycles with outbreaks of considerable violent conflict occurring during the disintegration periods,” explains archaeologist Detlef Gronenborn, from the Leibniz Centre for Archaeology in Mainz, Germany, one of the coauthors of the study.

“With this supra-regional study, we were able to show that the previous can be applied to a much broader region and to a much longer time period. Disintegration and warfare seem to be a general behavioral pattern,” evaluates Gronenborn.

“Additionally, the study indicates that humans and their interactions, whether friendly or violent, form a complex system, regardless of their political or economic organization. It doesn’t matter if you don’t

want to organize into a state, you are still affected by your neighbors and their neighbors as well,” adds Kondor.

2. Resilient Roots: Study Shows How Ancestors Thrived Amid Climate Shifts



New research conducted by an international team, published in the journal *Science*, reveals that early human species were capable of adapting to a variety of landscapes and food resources. This adaptability would have strengthened our ancestors' resilience against historical climate changes.

Our genus *Homo* evolved over the past 3 million years – a period of increasing warm/cold climate fluctuations. The mystery of how early human species adjusted to these intensified climate extremes, ice ages, and sweeping changes in landscapes and vegetation continues to baffle scientists.

Did our ancestors adjust to local environmental changes over time, or did they seek out more stable environments with diverse food

resources? Was our human evolution influenced more by temporal changes in climate, or by the spatial character of the environment?

To test these fundamental hypotheses on human evolution and adaptation quantitatively, the research team used a compilation of more than three thousand well-dated human fossil specimens and archeological sites, representing six different human species, in combination with realistic climate and vegetation model simulations, covering the past 3 million years. The scientists focused their analysis on biomes – geographic regions which are characterized by similar climates, plants, and animal communities (e.g., savannah, rainforest, or tundra).

“For the archeological and anthropological sites and corresponding ages, we extracted the local biome types from our climate-driven vegetation model. This revealed which biomes were favored by the extinct hominin species *H. ergaster*, *H. habilis*, *H. erectus*, *H. heidelbergensis*, and *H. neanderthalensis* and by our direct ancestors – *H. sapiens*.”, said Elke Zeller, a Ph.D. student from the IBS Center for Climate Physics at Pusan National University, South Korea, and lead author of the study.

According to their analysis, the scientists found that earlier African groups preferred to live in open environments, such as grassland and dry shrubland. Migrating into Eurasia around 1.8 million years ago, hominins, such as *H. erectus* and later *H. heidelbergensis* and *H. neanderthalensis* developed higher tolerances to other biomes over time, including temperate and boreal forests. “To survive as forest-dwellers, these groups developed more advanced stone tools and likely also social skills”, said Prof. Pasquale Raia, from the Università di Napoli Federico II, Italy, co-author of the study.

Eventually, *H. sapiens* emerged around 200,000 years ago in Africa, quickly becoming the master of all trades. Mobile, flexible, and

competitive, our direct ancestors, unlike any other species before, survived in harsh environments such as deserts and tundra. When further looking into the preferred landscape characteristics, the scientists found a significant clustering of early human occupation sites in regions with increased biome diversity.

“What that means is that our human ancestors had a liking for mosaic landscapes, with a great variety of plant and animal resources in close proximity”, said Prof. Axel Timmermann, co-author of the study and Director of the IBS Center for Climate Physics in South Korea. The results indicate that ecosystem diversity played a key role in human evolution. The authors demonstrated this preference for mosaic landscapes for the first time on continental scales and propose a new *Diversity Selection Hypothesis: Homo species, and H. sapiens, in particular, were uniquely equipped to exploit heterogeneous biomes.*

“Our analysis shows the crucial importance of landscape and plant diversity as a selective element for humans and as a potential driver for socio-cultural developments” adds Elke Zeller. Elucidating how vegetation shifts have shaped human sustenance, the new *Science* study provides an unprecedented view into human prehistory and survival strategies.

The climate and vegetation model simulations, which cover the Earth’s history of the past 3 million years, were conducted on one of South Korea’s fastest science supercomputers named Aleph.

“Supercomputing is now emerging as a key tool in evolutionary biology and anthropology,” said Axel Timmermann.

3. 300,000-Year-Old Weapon Reveals Early Humans Were Woodworking Masters



New research on a 300,000-year-old throwing stick reveals advanced woodworking techniques among early humans, suggesting communal hunting practices involving the whole community. The artifact, demonstrating high craftsmanship, indicates early humans' deep knowledge of wood properties.

Newly conducted research has revealed that early humans were proficient masters of woodworking.

This insight came from the detailed analysis of a 300,000-year-old double-pointed wooden throwing stick, discovered three decades ago in Schöningen, Germany. Research indicates that the stick was meticulously scraped, seasoned, and sanded before being used for hunting, suggesting a more advanced level of early human woodworking skills than previously believed.

Tools That Mobilized Communities

These findings, published in the journal PLOS ONE on July 19, also suggest that the creation of lightweight weapons such as this throwing stick potentially enabled communal hunts of medium and small animals. It is thought that the use of throwing sticks as hunting tools could have been a community-wide activity, even including children.

Dr. Annemieke Milks, of the University of Reading's Department of Archaeology, led the research. She said: "Discoveries of wooden tools have revolutionized our understanding of early human behaviors. Amazingly these early humans demonstrated an ability to plan well in advance, a strong knowledge of the properties of wood, and many sophisticated woodworking skills that we still use today.

"These lightweight throwing sticks may have been easier to launch than heavier spears, indicating the potential for the whole community to take part. Such tools could have been used by children while learning to throw and hunt."

Co-author Dirk Leder said: "The Schöningen humans used a spruce branch to make this aerodynamic and ergonomic tool. The woodworking involved multiple steps including cutting and stripping off the bark, carving it into an aerodynamic shape, scraping away more of the surface, seasoning the wood to avoid cracking and warping, and sanding it for easier handling."

High-Impact Weapon

Found in 1994, the 77 cm (30 inch) long stick is one of several different tools discovered in Schöningen, which includes throwing spears, thrusting spears, and another similarly sized throwing stick.

The double-pointed throwing stick - analyzed to an exceptionally high level of detail for this new study - was most likely used by early

humans to hunt medium-sized game like red and roe deer, and possibly fast-small prey including hare and birds that were otherwise difficult to catch.

The throwing sticks would have been thrown rotationally – similar to a boomerang – rather than overhead like a modern-day javelin and may have enabled early humans to throw as far as 30 meters (100 feet). Although lightweight, the high velocities at which such weapons can be launched could have resulted in deadly high-energy impacts.

Intimate Connection Between the Tool and Its User

The fine surface, carefully shaped points, and polish from handling suggest this was a piece of personal kit with repeated use, rather than a quickly made tool that was carelessly discarded.

Principal investigator Thomas Terberger said: “The systematic analysis of the wooden finds of the Schöningen site financed by the German Research Foundation provides valuable new insights and further exciting information on these early wooden weapons can be expected soon.”

4. In affidavit in SC, Centre defends exclusion of Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims from scheduled castes' list



The Centre has defended the exclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims from the list of scheduled castes, saying historical data shows no backwardness or oppression was ever faced by them

The Centre has defended the exclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims from the list of scheduled castes, saying historical data shows no backwardness or oppression was ever faced by them.

Contending that Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims cannot claim benefits which scheduled castes are entitled to, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in an affidavit in the Supreme Court said the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950 does not suffer from any unconstitutionality.

The affidavit was filed in response to a plea of NGO Centre for Public Interest Litigation (CPIL) seeking extension of reservation and other benefits to people from Dalit communities who converted to Islam and Christianity.

The ministry also submitted that the identification of scheduled castes is centred around a specific social stigma that is limited to the communities identified in the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950.

The Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1950, "does not suffer from any unconstitutionality inasmuch as the exclusion of Christianity or Islam was due to the reason that the oppressive system of untouchability that leads to economic and social backwardness of some Hindu castes was not prevalent in Christian or Islamic societies", the affidavit said.

The Order "was based on historical data which clearly established that no such backwardness or oppression was ever faced by members of Christian or Islamic society", it said.

"In fact, one of the reasons for which people from scheduled castes have been converting to religions like Islam or Christianity is so that they can come out of the oppressive system of untouchability which is not prevalent at all in Christianity or Islam," the affidavit said.

The ministry also refused to agree with the report of the Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission that recommended inclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in the scheduled castes list, and said it took a myopic view.

PAPER - 2

INDIAN & TRIBAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Woman from Assam has given 22 Years to Bring Education to Tribal Groups & Help Heal Trauma



Assam-born Ananya Paul Dodmani was moved by the conditions of the tribal communities she grew up with, and has dedicated her life to uplifting and empowering them with Tribal Connect, which has community centres across India. At a learning centre in Lumding, Assam, children from the local tribes come faithfully every day to engage in a slew of activities such as reading, writing and listening to stories told by the village grandmothers. Some of these children live at the centre itself, with their food taken care of by the attached community kitchen. There are also facilities for mothers who are victims of domestic violence to stay here.

The centre is a hub of laughter, chatter and progress. Similar to this centre in Lumding, 160 others have been set up across Northeast India, West Bengal, Karnataka, and Goa. And at the helm of these Ananya Paul Dodmani, founder of Tribal Connect, a foundation working tirelessly to uplift and empower indigenous communities, like the Kunbis of Goa and Uttar Kannada, the Siddis in Karnataka and Karbi, Dima and Kuki tribes of Assam.

Ananya's is a tale of valour, a journey of persisting every single day to ensure that tribal communities in India finally get the safe space and respect they deserve.

'It started when I was in school.'

The communities that Ananya works with have had a long history of being marginalised. For instance, the Siddi community remains among India's most neglected tribes and have spent generations in abject poverty. Additionally, many of the tribes in Northeast India lack access to basic facilities like education.

Ananya recounts her early schooling years in Assam, where a majority of her friends and neighbours hailed from Santhals and other tribal communities. "There was a certain disparity between their ways of life and our ways of life," she notes.

It wasn't until she was in class 8 that these incidents began to become more vivid. Ananya shares that most of her friends who stayed in the school hostel wouldn't return after the summer holidays. Their parents would tell the school that they had contracted malaria during the holidays and passed away. Ananya would hear these stories with dismay, all the while feeling guilty about her own privileges.

One particular day she was made more aware of these privileges while at a shop with her caretaker. A local tribe woman was buying a product that cost Rs 10. But when she handed the shopkeeper a Rs 20 note, he stubbornly insisted that it was actually a Rs 10 note, and

refused to give her change. "I realised these people needed to be taught at least basic things like recognising money denominations, writing their own name, reading bus numbers and train timings, etc," Ananya says.

And that's the moment she realised if they couldn't access these learnings anywhere, she would create a space where they could.

"I began to look out for kids loitering around and I would ask them to come to the local school, where I found an empty space where I could have them sit and learn basic topics. I would read stories to them too."

Soon Ananya was joined by other batchmates who were also keen on imparting their knowledge to the local tribal kids. The team she formed would travel across the villages of Northeast India on weekends, raise funds through cultural activities, football matches, and more.

When Ananya passed out of school and went to college, she began convincing her professors to conduct exchange programmes that would also facilitate these children to travel and learn. But then, an incident shook Ananya's world, compelling her to make tribal upliftment a goal she wanted to dedicate her life to.

'My dad was kidnapped.'

Though Ananya had grown up hearing incidents of people from local tribal communities being kidnapped, she only realised the gravity of the situation when her own father was abducted one day in 2002, she says. "You'll never know the heat of the fire until it burns your own house."

"It was traumatic," she recalls. "For seven days, he was tortured, beaten and was only able to escape when he jumped from the third floor of the building where he was being kept hostage. He ran several

kilometres to reach the closest railway station to reach home. This incident had a heavy impact on my brain.”

Through Tribal Connect, Ananya teaches the children skills like basic reading and writing, and narrates stories to them, Picture source: Ananya

While at the time she was fuelled with angst for what had happened, looking back now she says a lack of education compels people to resort to kidnapping others for money. “These unconstitutional people have been brainwashed into doing these things. It’s only when one does not have money to put food on the table for their child that they do things that are not constitutional,” she adds.

Ananya knew that while she had been teaching those around her the basics of education, there was a dire need for her to increase the numbers and scale to see visible impact. Driven by this fire to create a change, she started her first learning centre in the same village where her father had been held hostage following being kidnapped (a name she avoids mentioning).

She started small, with the resources she had at the time. She explained her plans of setting up a centre where children could learn, and the youth could get employment opportunities to the *gram buda* (headman) of the village. But, she notes, they couldn’t envision her dream. So she started under a banyan tree in 2003 with five kids keen on learning.

Today, the same concept is applied at the 160-odd learning centres across India, albeit in a more organised form. Though these centres have existed for years, Ananya formally established the organisation in 2019.

A welcome space for everyone

At the learning centres, language is no barrier. Ananya frequently employs local youth so they can teach the children in a language they understand best. "I collaborate with any NGO or foundation that can help us in bringing about change," she notes.

In 2019, when Ananya got married and moved to South India, she found many tribes facing the same issues as those she had seen in the Northeast. "I began working with tribes such as Siddi, Halakki and Kundi."

She explains that education is free at the learning centres, as are meals thrice a day. There is also a community farming model through which the children and men can grow their own food, which then goes into the meals. A unique concept is that grandmothers are housed with the children so that they can look after them. This benefits both, says Ananya. At a time, 35 kids can be accommodated at a centre.

There are also community centres for men who don't have jobs. Here, they practise community farming to grow produce and sell it in the markets, while the leftovers are used in the community kitchens. Every learning centre is headed by three local youth, says Ananya so that the centres continue to thrive even while she is away.

This was always something she wanted. "My work is often in conflict zones and I do not want the workings of the community centre to stop should something happen to me."

Women who are victims of domestic violence, men who have lost their jobs and elderly people are also welcome at the community centres, Picture source: Ananya

'I will persist no matter what.'

Aside from the work Ananya does for the community centres she also creates awareness related to menstruation and has reached "over

90,000 tribal women” through her workshops. These include teaching women to make sustainable pads at home, distributing pads to the women in villages and even introducing the concept of eco-friendly menstrual cups.

With 700 volunteers, Tribal Connect is bringing a change in the lives of people in marginalised communities across the country. Ananya was awarded the Karamveer Chakra for her work in 2019.

“Sometimes I see kids who come from broken homes to the centres only for the food. But in 10 days, they are transformed seeing the environment around and we inculcate habits of good learning in them,” she explains.

She goes on to recount an instance where one of the girls stopped coming to the learning centre as she started menstruating and the family did not want her to leave home. “I sat outside their house for two nights, caught a cold and fever in the process, but did not budge until they promised she would be back at the centre.”

Twenty two long years of persisting and Ananya is still going strong.

“It is your willpower,” she affirms. “Our community centre isn’t always made up of walls. Sometimes it’s just a tent, washed away by the heavy rains every year or trampled upon by elephants at other times. But what sets us apart is that we rebuild every time.”

To this she adds, “Everyone has trauma. It’s how you let it change your life that makes all the difference. I could have chosen to be a victim because of what happened to my dad, but instead I looked fear in the eyes and chose to start a centre right in that very spot.”

2. Baiga Woman Turns Hut Into 'Beej Bank' for 150+ Rare Millets, Named Brand Ambassador



Lahari Bai, a Baiga tribal woman from Madhya Pradesh, was declared the brand ambassador for the 'International Year of The Millet'. So far, she has conserved over 150 varieties of rare millet seeds in her beej bank. After getting lessons from her grandmother on the health benefits of millet, the grain that has started disappearing, Lahari Bai dedicated her life to preserving its seeds.

She belongs to the *Baiga* (healer) tribal community, a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) in Madhya Pradesh. It is believed that the people from this tribe possess a deep knowledge of their environment and its biodiversity, which they pass on from one generation to the next through oral traditions.

Inspired by her grandma's words, Lahari, who hails from the remote village of Silpadi in the Dindori district, started collecting seeds at the age of 18 years. She continues to collect the seeds even now from forests and farms by wandering in nearby villages.

“Collecting seeds makes me happy. People would mock me and ask why was I collecting seeds. So, at times, I would go when no one was around,” Lahari tells **The Better India** in her native language *Baiga*, adding that the elderly people in her community help her recognise the indigenous varieties of seeds.

The voice of millet

Millet is a storehouse of nutrition, rich in protein, fibre, and abundant vitamins. Their consumption helps protect cardiovascular health, prevent diabetes, and lose weight. The tribal woman, who never went to school, understood the importance of conserving these seeds long ago.

“These are *taakat wala anaaj* (the powerhouse of nutrition). People do not get sick after their regular consumption. It saves them from the expense of medicines,” she says.

For the past decade, the 27-year-old has collected more than 150 varieties of rare millet including *kodo*, *kutki*, *sikiya*, *salhar*, *sawa*, and *chena*. “These native seeds are getting extinct. I want to bring them back in use,” she says.

She distributes these millet seeds to farmers for cultivation. In return, they gift her a small part of the produce after they harvest the crop. For instance, for a kilogram of seeds that she offers, the farmers gift her 1.5 kg of seeds back of the same variety. She says that she does not do this to earn money but to collect more seeds.

Lahari has collected more than 150 varieties of rare millet in her seed bank.

Lahari also uses these seeds to make *pej* (a kind of drink) from *kodo* and *kutki* seeds. She drinks it along with *takodey ki bhaji* (forest vegetable).

The *Baiga* woman leads a simple life with her old parents in a two-room mud house in her village that has no network connectivity.

The family uses one room as the living room and kitchen. Their clothes are hung on a wooden pin in one corner, and in another corner is a *chulha* (stove) arranged along with a few utensils and all their belongings. The second room of the mud house is dedicated to storing varieties of millet seeds.

Lahari has many large mud containers with the names of different seed varieties printed on them in her *beej* (seed) bank. A variety of millet seeds that look like decoratives also hang from the roof.

Apart from distributing these seeds for free, Lahari does labour jobs and sells forest produce and firewood for a living. She manages to earn up to Rs 3,000 a month.

Becoming an ambassador for millet

This year, the Indian government is striving to make India a global hub of millet cultivation and research. During the union budget speech, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also referred to millets as *Shree Ann* – the mother of all grains.

Recently, she was invited as a chief guest at the Republic Day parade in Dindori by the District Collector. This was the first time Lahari stood on the stage. “Entire *janta* (public) was looking at me. It feels so nice to get so much recognition. Now the same villagers who mocked me, get jealous,” she says.

Post Republic Day, Lahari has given interviews to more than 100 journalists from the state capital of Bhopal and the national capital of New Delhi. Lahari has only two pairs of clothes but dresses up neatly whenever she travels for interviews.

On choosing the tribal woman as chief guest, the District Collector says, “The people from this primitive community have extensive knowledge about the environment. Half of the *kodo kutki* [millet] production is done by the Baiga community. Lahari is very enthusiastic about her work. Her *beej* bank is praiseworthy,” says Vikas, who is also promoting millet by organising cookery shows, where women make cakes, pastries, and biscuits from millet, and also process them into healthy soups.

He has nominated Lahari for Rs 10 lakh scholarship from a Jodhpur-based ICAR. “If she succeeds in getting this scholarship, she would be seen guiding the PhD students,” he says, adding that the government has also sanctioned a house for her.

3. Chenchu tribals



Recently, the **Chenchu tribals**, joined the drive to make Nallamala forests of Andhra Pradesh free of plastic.

- Eco-tourism, nature trails, jungle safaris and wildlife tourism brought the menace of plastic pollution.
- The native Chenchu tribals have been roped in for a drive to become the green warriors of the Nallamala forests of Andhra Pradesh.

Chenchu tribals:-

- The Chenchu are a tiny migratory forest tribe from
- They migrate over the state lines of **Andhra Pradesh** and Odisha in search of work.
- They are a **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG)**.
 - **PVTG:** is a sub-classification of a Scheduled Tribe or section of a Scheduled Tribe that is considered more vulnerable than a regular Scheduled Tribe.
- **Language:** they talk in the **Chenchu language**, a member of the Dravidian language family.
- **Dravidian languages family:** a language family spoken by people, mainly **in southern India, northeast Sri Lanka, and south-west Pakistan**.
 - It includes **Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam**.
- **Distribution:** They are forest dwellers whose hamlets or Pentas dot the **Nallamala forest range** spread across four to five districts in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states.
 - They **dwell in little homes with wattle dividers** that look like colonies.
 - They are **magnificent climbers**.
- **Features:** they are low in height, with a long head, clear-cut foreheads, and a level nose.
 - Their coloring goes from wheat dark to brown, and they have ebony wavy hair.
- **Occupation:** Their traditional way of life has been based on **hunting and gathering**.

- They make leaf cups and **leaf plates out of tobacco leaves, tamarind, and mahua flowers** and sell them in the local market.
- They also make **use of the mahua flower in making the liquor.**
- They are also master **bamboo cutters and honey catchers.**

Nallamala Forest Area

- They are the largest stretches of undisturbed forest in **South India**, apart from the Western Ghats.
- **Location:** It is located in Nallamala Hills, which is a part of the Eastern Ghats.
 - It lies **south of the Krishna River.**
 - Nallamala Forest Reserve is located in the **Nallamala Ranges of the Eastern Ghats.**
- A part of the forest reserve belongs to **the Nagarjunsagar-Srisailem Tiger Reserve** which is the largest Tiger Reserve in India.
- **Climate:** It has a **warm to hot climate** throughout the year.
 - Summer is especially hot and winters are mostly cool and dry.
 - It gets most of its rain during the **South West monsoon.**
- **Vegetation: Tropical dry deciduous.**
- **Fauna:** tigers, leopards, such as black buck, wild hog, peacock, pangolin, Indian Python King Cobras and several rare bird species.

4. Zo peoples of Manipur & Mizoram



Mizoram chief minister called for peace in Manipur, saying the situation had only “worsened.”

Zo people

- The **Zo peoples** include all tribes of the **Chin-Kuki-Mizo ethnic group** spread across **Myanmar, India, and Bangladesh**, along with many **sub-tribes** and clans such as the **Chin, Kuki, Mizo, Lushei**, etc. **based on geographic distribution.**
- In **North-Eastern India**, they are present in **Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya** and **Assam.**

Chin homeland:

- The **Chin Hills**, or **Indo-Chin hill ranges**, is a **thickly forested region** with an elevation of 2,100-3,000 metres in **northwestern Myanmar**.
- The Hills are **home to a large number of tribes** that come under the Zo umbrella.

About Zo people of North-East India:

- Manipur's Kuki-Zomi peoples come under the larger umbrella of the **Zo ethnic tribes**, one of the largest of which are the **Lushei of Mizoram**.
- The tribes are believed to have **migrated from China** through **Tibet** to settle in **Myanmar**, and **speak a group of Tibeto-Burman languages**.
- Constant feuds among the tribal clans and their kings (chieftains) drove many of the clans westward to **modern-day Mizoram** and **parts of Manipur** in the **17th century**.
- They settled in new villages, but even so, remained socially and emotionally enmeshed with the **Chin tribes of Myanmar**.
- Apart from ethnicity and religion, the tribes are knit together by **Christianity**.
- The **Kuki-Zomi of Manipur** share the history and memories of the **violent Mizo nationalist movement of the 1960s**.

Zo reunification:

- The movement for "**Zo reunification**" has largely petered out in the face of the **political implausibility**.

- It has carved out areas from Manipur and Tripura, and from Arakan in Myanmar and the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh, to integrate with Mizoram.

5. Assam Woman Has Given 22 Years to Bring Education to Tribal Groups & Help Heal Trauma

Assam-born Ananya Paul Dodmani was moved by the conditions of the tribal communities she grew up with, and has dedicated her life to uplifting and empowering them with Tribal Connect, which has community centres across India.

At a learning centre in Lumding, Assam, children from the local tribes come faithfully every day to engage in a slew of activities such as reading, writing and listening to stories told by the village grandmothers. Some of these children live at the centre itself, with their food taken care of by the attached community kitchen. There are also facilities for mothers who are victims of domestic violence to stay here.

The centre is a hub of laughter, chatter and progress. Similar to this centre in Lumding, 160 others have been set up across Northeast India, West Bengal, Karnataka, and Goa. And at the helm of these Ananya Paul Dodmani, founder of Tribal Connect, a foundation working tirelessly to uplift and empower indigenous communities, like the Kunbis of Goa and Uttar Kannada, the Siddis in Karnataka and Karbi, Dima and Kuki tribes of Assam.

Ananya's is a tale of valour, a journey of persisting every single day to ensure that tribal communities in India finally get the safe space and respect they deserve.

'It started when I was in school.'

The communities that Ananya works with have had a long history of being marginalised. For instance, the Siddi community remains among India's most neglected tribes and have spent generations in abject poverty. Additionally, many of the tribes in Northeast India lack access to basic facilities like education.

Ananya recounts her early schooling years in Assam, where a majority of her friends and neighbours hailed from Santhals and other tribal communities. "There was a certain disparity between their ways of life and our ways of life," she notes.

It wasn't until she was in class 8 that these incidents began to become more vivid. Ananya shares that most of her friends who stayed in the school hostel wouldn't return after the summer holidays. Their parents would tell the school that they had contracted malaria during the holidays and passed away. Ananya would hear these stories with dismay, all the while feeling guilty about her own privileges.

One particular day she was made more aware of these privileges while at a shop with her caretaker. A local tribe woman was buying a product that cost Rs 10. But when she handed the shopkeeper a Rs 20 note, he stubbornly insisted that it was actually a Rs 10 note, and refused to give her change. "I realised these people needed to be taught at least basic things like recognising money denominations, writing their own name, reading bus numbers and train timings, etc," Ananya says.

And that's the moment she realised if they couldn't access these learnings anywhere, she would create a space where they could.

"I began to look out for kids loitering around and I would ask them to come to the local school, where I found an empty space where I could have them sit and learn basic topics. I would read stories to them too."

Soon Ananya was joined by other batchmates who were also keen on imparting their knowledge to the local tribal kids. The team she formed would travel across the villages of Northeast India on weekends, raise funds through cultural activities, football matches, and more.

When Ananya passed out of school and went to college, she began convincing her professors to conduct exchange programmes that would also facilitate these children to travel and learn. But then, an incident shook Ananya's world, compelling her to make tribal upliftment a goal she wanted to dedicate her life to.

'My dad was kidnapped.'

Though Ananya had grown up hearing incidents of people from local tribal communities being kidnapped, she only realised the gravity of the situation when her own father was abducted one day in 2002, she says. "You'll never know the heat of the fire until it burns your own house."

"It was traumatic," she recalls. "For seven days, he was tortured, beaten and was only able to escape when he jumped from the third floor of the building where he was being kept hostage. He ran several kilometres to reach the closest railway station to reach home. This incident had a heavy impact on my brain."

While at the time she was fuelled with angst for what had happened, looking back now she says a lack of education compels people to resort to kidnapping others for money. "These unconstitutional people have been brainwashed into doing these things. It's only when one does not have money to put food on the table for their child that they do things that are not constitutional," she adds.

Ananya knew that while she had been teaching those around her the basics of education, there was a dire need for her to increase the numbers and scale to see visible impact. Driven by this fire to create a

change, she started her first learning centre in the same village where her father had been held hostage following being kidnapped (a name she avoids mentioning).

She started small, with the resources she had at the time. She explained her plans of setting up a centre where children could learn, and the youth could get employment opportunities to the *gram buda* (headman) of the village. But, she notes, they couldn't envision her dream. So she started under a banyan tree in 2003 with five kids keen on learning.

Today, the same concept is applied at the 160-odd learning centres across India, albeit in a more organised form. Though these centres have existed for years, Ananya formally established the organisation in 2019.

A welcome space for everyone

At the learning centres, language is no barrier. Ananya frequently employs local youth so they can teach the children in a language they understand best. "I collaborate with any NGO or foundation that can help us in bringing about change," she notes.

In 2019, when Ananya got married and moved to South India, she found many tribes facing the same issues as those she had seen in the Northeast. "I began working with tribes such as Siddi, Halakki and Kundi."

She explains that education is free at the learning centres, as are meals thrice a day. There is also a community farming model through which the children and men can grow their own food, which then goes into the meals. A unique concept is that grandmothers are housed with the children so that they can look after them. This benefits both, says Ananya. At a time, 35 kids can be accommodated at a centre.

There are also community centres for men who don't have jobs. Here, they practise community farming to grow produce and sell it in the

markets, while the leftovers are used in the community kitchens. Every learning centre is headed by three local youth, says Ananya so that the centres continue to thrive even while she is away.

This was always something she wanted. “My work is often in conflict zones and I do not want the workings of the community centre to stop should something happen to me.”

‘I will persist no matter what.’

Aside from the work Ananya does for the community centres she also creates awareness related to menstruation and has reached “over 90,000 tribal women” through her workshops. These include teaching women to make sustainable pads at home, distributing pads to the women in villages and even introducing the concept of eco-friendly menstrual cups.

With 700 volunteers, Tribal Connect is bringing a change in the lives of people in marginalised communities across the country. Ananya was awarded the Karamveer Chakra for her work in 2019.

“Sometimes I see kids who come from broken homes to the centres only for the food. But in 10 days, they are transformed seeing the environment around and we inculcate habits of good learning in them,” she explains.

She goes on to recount an instance where one of the girls stopped coming to the learning centre as she started menstruating and the family did not want her to leave home. “I sat outside their house for two nights, caught a cold and fever in the process, but did not budge until they promised she would be back at the centre.”

Twenty two long years of persisting and Ananya is still going strong.

How?

“It is your willpower,” she affirms. “Our community centre isn’t always made up of walls. Sometimes it’s just a tent, washed away by the heavy rains every year or trampled upon by elephants at other times. But what sets us apart is that we rebuild every time.”

To this she adds, “Everyone has trauma. It’s how you let it change your life that makes all the difference. I could have chosen to be a victim because of what happened to my dad, but instead I looked fear in the eyes and chose to start a centre right in that very spot.”

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7. Adivasi Women Are Reclaiming Centuries-Old Warli Art With GI-Tags & Huge Murals



Over the years, Adivasi women were sidelined from practising the simple yet beautiful Warli art. Meet the people fighting for the art to be internationally recognised and for more women and youth to earn from its practice.

It was predominantly an art made by women. Simple art consisting of circles, triangles, lines and dots. All arranged differently and only in white, either on red background of geru (red clay) or greenish brown of cow dung smeared on the walls. They sketched when they were happy when there was a birth, a wedding or death in the family. These women took up their 'brush' and 'paints' to draw sowing paddy, when it rained, when they harvested, when a snake or a tiger entered their fields, when they worshipped or when they celebrated.

They are the Adivasis of Warli, and their art has come to be known as Warli art. Originally hunter-gatherers, the former nomads, have now settled on the Western coasts of Maharashtra and Gujarat states. Forests lands in talukas like Jawahar, Palghar, Dahanu, Nashik, etc. have *padas* (hamlets) of the Warlis.

For thousands of years, it was Warli women who painted mud walls of their bamboo houses with everyday events of their lives. In her book, *The painted world of the Warlis*, art historian Yashodhara Dalmia says that the tradition of Warlis goes back to 2500 BCE or 3000 BCE and that their paintings are similar to those found in the Rock Shelters in Bhimbetka, in Madhya Pradesh which were said to be around 500 BCE to 10,000 BCE. But there are no records of this claim. The general belief is that this art originated somewhere in the 10th century AD.

For Warli women, both the inner and outer walls of their bamboo huts form the canvass. And their 'brushes' were made from thin portions of a particular type of bamboo growing around their homes in the forests. 'Paints' were home-ground rice flour soaked in water. For binding, the flour paste to the mud walls naturally found tree gum was added.

The love for nature, God and family were drawn in simple images by women. The most important drawing of Warli is the *Chowk*, especially on the occasion of a wedding or an important holy festival. In fact, even today, no marriage ceremony begins without the first drawing of a *Lagin Chowk* (the wedding square). And this has to be done by *savasinis* (married women) to the accompaniment of soulful singing by *dhavaleri* (widowed women who are recognised as a priestess). At the time of other festivals, the *Dev Chowk* is drawn in the same way.

Though *Chowks* form the main art, there are other events which are also drawn on the entire walls. And these wall murals can be drawn by anyone.

“We write the *Chowk*, we don’t draw,” emphasises the over 70-year-old Santi Wangal Varta, a *dhavaleri* talking from her small house in Wagholi, Dahanu taluka. A very cheery woman who is almost blinded by cataracts in both eyes explains that a *Chowk* is written according to the words of the song that is sung accompanying the event.

“When we sing ‘*tetha bijesara deva, jyaca bija padala, hota navarica ra deva...* (the God of lighting was present, he gave us lighting, he was the God of the bride)’, the *savasinis* write the sun, light and the figure of the bride. That’s how the *Chowk* is written.” Regretfully, she adds, “Now I can’t see properly, otherwise I would have written and shown it to you while singing. I wrote more than ten chowks every year for more than three decades.”

Somewhere around the 1970s, this beautiful unfolding of events by women was hijacked by men when Padma Shri awardee the tribal artist Jivya Soma Mashe of Talasari district in Maharashtra, was discovered by the then Handloom Handicrafts Export Corporation officer Bhaskar Kulkarni. It was he who took Mashe’s art to show the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This paved the way for men to step in.

It was easy for men to go out of their homes and show the world the art which they learnt from their women folk. Slowly, in the last three decades or so, Warli art changed hands – from women to men. But surprisingly even today it’s a *savasini* who has to draw the first line of the *Chowk* which is later completed by male artists.

“In a way it was good that Jivya Soma Mashe was discovered which helped Warli people and their art get a pan-India and worldwide recognition,” says Sachin Satvi, an engineer, who along with a few other Warli members founded AYUSH (Adivasi Yuva Shakti) and Adivasi Yuva Seva Sangh (Adiyuva) to help empower Warli youth.

Now working as a senior manager at a multinational automotive company in Hyderabad, he still is a beacon of hope to all Warli youngsters.

Sachin, belonging to the Adivasi Warli, realised the problems faced by other students who wanted to pursue higher studies, get accommodation, get jobs, etc. while he was studying for his diploma and later for his engineering degree way back in 1999. It was very difficult for youngsters who come from small Adivasi hamlets to adjust to Mumbai life and get the information they wanted. He and a few of his friends and batchmates, who were also Warlis, realised this lacuna that though the government had made many plans to help the Adivasis, the information hadn't trickled down. That's when the story of AYUSH began. As an NGO it was registered in 2011.

The AYUSH team also secured the GI (Geographical Indication) tag for the Warli art by spending more than Rs 5 lakh from their own pockets. But this story dates back to a time when Orkut - a social networking service was still functioning.

Back when the young boys decided to host a page of their organisation with a picture of Warli's painting as their motif on the now defunct website, they got a notice from Orkut saying that the motif wasn't registered by them and they couldn't use it.

"That was a real jolt to us," recalls Sachin. "Warli art has belonged to us for centuries and we never thought of claiming it. But when we got the notice, we not only took down our page from Orkut but also decided to apply for the GI tag, which we got in 2014."

Once they got this established, AYUSH started reinventing Warli art to make it commercially viable for everyone so that along with the survival of art even the artists could earn to survive.

“It was a herculean task to get our women back to painting. The worst part was that for various reasons like migration to cities by parents they had forgotten their art, culture and traditions. We conduct workshops to train them where we teach them the significance of each step. To get them interested we teach them the commercial methods of painting the Warli motifs on saris, bags, wooden lamps and many other commercial products which we sell through our outlet Mahalaxmi located on the Mumbai-Nagpur highway near Dahanu and at handicrafts exhibitions,” explains Punam Chaure, coordinator at AYUSH.

Today, they have more than 350 people trained in the art who are making a living out of Warli painting. Out of which there are 58 women – girls, *suvasins* and *dhavalelris*. Two years of the pandemic seems to have helped the resurrection of women Warli artists. Another group, The Dhavaleri, have only women artists. Kirti Nilesh Vartha, one of the founder members of this group who happily calls herself a feminist says, “Since 2019, we managed to train 30 girls in Warli art. Some of them knew how to paint but didn’t know the exact designs, or the meaning behind the motifs. Under the guidance of the young Suchita Kamdi who learnt Warli art from her grandmother, these girls learnt fast and so far we have managed to draw 19 *Chowks*.”

The all-women team drawing 19 *Chowks* in two years is very commendable as people had stopped believing that women artists could draw a *Chowk*. The Dhavaleri group got a boost when they got an opportunity to write a gigantic wall mural on the lobby walls at the Collector Office in Palghar to commemorate International Women’s Day celebration on 8 March 2022.

The group comprised only women who came from different parts of the Palghar district and wrote the large panel within a day.

The uniqueness of this mural is that it shows the importance of Warli women in all aspects of life. It depicts the detailed work of a *dhavaleri*, *suvasini* and the *soyin* who work as midwives and traditional healers and the *Talanwali* who perform the funeral rites. This might be the first mural of its kind to have depicted the entire life cycle of Warli women. And of course, it was painted with acrylic paint and brushes. This changing of work material is adapted by every folk art for the longevity of the work.

“We first planned it on paper in detail as to who will draw what and at which place on the wall. We are all very happy to have got this assignment for our women’s group,” says Suchita Kamdi. Suchita recalls a time she faced a bit of opposition when she took up writing *Chowk* from some male artists who were upset that women were gaining back their right to draw.

“Some said our *Chowk* wasn’t correct. So, I asked them to point out the incorrectness. But now I think we have got back our work. We need to train more women in the art and train them to sing the songs while writing the *Chowk*, which we are slowly doing,” explains Suchita.

The women were paid Rs 60,000 for this mural instead of the standard Rs 1,200 to Rs 1,500 per *Chowk*. Whereas known male artists who are invited to draw the *Chowk* get paid considerably more to the tune of Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000 plus.

8. 25 Mobile Schools to Migrate with Kashmir's Nomadic Gujjars and Bakherwals!



Every year, the nomadic Gujjar and Bakherwal communities migrate to the upper reaches of the Kashmir valley in summer. The two ethnic groups rear flocks of sheep and goat, between high and low altitudes, in the Western Himalayas. Now, since summers are well underway, these people have started their migration from the hotter areas of Jammu, to the colder, mountainous regions of Kashmir.

These tribal folks observe a nomadic lifestyle and follow the custom of annual migrations and keep travelling year after year. Due to this, their children are deprived of a proper education.

Well, this is set to change, as authorities in the Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir have made arrangements for around two dozen schools to move with the nomadic tribes and ensure that the children can learn, even while on the move.

According to the plan, 25 schools, with a roll-strength of 801 students, will move with the migrants. Each school will be provided with 45 teachers for running it, and the initiative will be beneficial even when the migration reaches the high-altitude areas in Kashmir. There are another 41 schools for tribal populations that remain stationary. These cater to around 1,451 students, of which 802 are boys, and 651 are girls. According to an official J&K spokesperson, quoted in IndiaTimes, around 95 teachers have been posted for this purpose.

According to an official spokesperson, Shahid Iqbal Choudhary, who is the District Development Commissioner of Rajouri, finalised the plan for these mobile schools, in a meeting with senior officers from various departments, and heads and staff of migratory schools.

The meeting saw several decisions taken:-

- 1) The department will provide sports equipment and first aid kits to each migratory school.
- 2) A comprehensive plan for self-defence training was discussed and finalised.
- 3) The Chief Education Officer will regularly oversee attendance in migratory schools.
- 4) The heads of schools will hold mandatory parent-teacher meetings, twice a month, during the migratory period.
- 5) The students will be provided with a scholarship by the Tribal Affairs Department.
- 6) Records and pictures of meetings and classes will be shared online.

For the Bakherwal and Gujjar community, a mobile school might just be the solution to overcome logistical issues in education, which has been a long-standing problem

Nomadic communities cannot commit to staying in one place for too

long, and while it is important for them to educate their children, it will also be dicey for them to leave their children behind and then travel hundreds of kilometres.

The children complete the arduous migration along with their elders, camping at forest sites they have used for centuries. The initiative of mobile schools will ensure that no matter where these nomadic tribal folks have camped, their children will never be too far away from an educational environment!

9. New Forest Conservation Bill to Enable Corporate Take Over of Tribal Land, say Activists



Forest rights activists have come out with scathing criticism of Forest Conservation (Amendment) Bill 2023 and emphasised that it disempowers the tribal people by allowing land transfer to the

government and private sector. The union government on March 27 introduced the bill in the Lok Sabha to seek its assent on amendments. The statement and objects of the bill argue that the horizons of the act need to be broadened to accommodate the changing environmental, social and ecological needs, particularly national targets of net zero emissions by 2070, land for security purposes to combat terrorism and other non-forestry purposes.

Addressing a press conference in the national capital on Tuesday, the constituent organisations of Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan (BAA) said that the definitions and scope of the existing act had been changed to suit the interests of the corporate sector. BAA is an umbrella organisation of individuals, groups and unions working on the question of land rights, which came into existence after the struggle on the Land Acquisition Act.

BAA demands that the proposed Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023, be immediately withdrawn or revisited. The Act be made compliant with the provisions of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) to ensure a more robust legal mechanism conceding the primary authority of Gram Sabha to conserve, protect and comply with the fulfilment of the legal mandate of ensuring forest rights vested on the decision making of Gram Sabhas before any diversion of forest land. They have also called for “Black Day” on 30 June 2023 with a Nation-Wide Demonstration at the block and district level to strengthen demands for Land Rights.

Hannan Mollah, Vice President of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), said there had been consistent attacks in the last nine years of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, whether farm laws or other legal changes. The proposed changes are against the spirit of the FRA, which reversed the historical wrongs on Tribal people by colonial and post independent governments. He said that the proposed amendments snatch away the rights of gram sabhas under Panchayat

(Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) 1996, National Forest Policy 1988 and FRA 2006.

Pointing to Section 1A (2) of the bill, he said that exemptions in the bill violate FRA nullifying the power of Gram Sabha that governs over all forest land and requires the consent of Gram Sabha before diverting forest land. "The present Union Government eases the diversions of forest and forest land to private agencies for linear projects, mineral prospecting, grant of mining leases, creation of land banks, and granting "in principle" Stage I clearance disregarding FRA in its totality," he said.

Section 1 A (2) read, "a) such forest land situated alongside a rail line or a public road maintained by the Government, which provides access to a habitation, or to a rail, and roadside amenity up to a maximum size of 0.10 hectare in each case; (b) such tree, tree plantation or reforestation raised on lands that are not specified in clause (a) or clause (b) of sub-section (1); and (c) such forest land, – (i) as is situated within a distance of one hundred kilometres along international borders or Line of Control or Line of Actual Control, as the case may be, proposed to be used for construction of strategic linear project of national importance and concerning national security; or (ii) up to ten hectares, proposed to be used for construction of security related infrastructure; or (iii) as is proposed to be used for construction of defence related project or a camp for paramilitary forces or public utility projects, as may be specified by the Central Government, the extent of which does not exceed five hectares in a Left Wing Extremism affected area as may be notified by the Central Government."

Further, the amendment of Section 2 inserts a new sub-section 2, which exempts from FCA any survey, such as reconnaissance, prospecting, investigation, or exploration, including seismic survey, by saying that such survey shall not be treated as non-forest purpose.

He added that 90,000 hectares of land had been transferred to the corporate sector for non-forestry purposes.

Roma Malik from All India Union for Forest Working People said that the bill, introduced as a general act, violates the Forest Rights Act, a Special Act. She said, "The Forest Rights Act reverses the injustices to tribal population done through previous acts in the colonial era. However, the forest department remains the largest owner of the land and disempowering millions of tribal families." She added that the amendments would cause massive deforestation and degradation of the environment, disturbance in biodiversity and livelihood of forest-dependent communities. The proposed amendments are pro-corporate, pro-industrialist, pro-privatisation and pro-bureaucratic control, clearly shifting the democratic governance of forests from Gram Sabhas.

10. Toda women; the torchbearers of tradition



Amidst today's changing lifestyle and trends, Toda tribe women, based in Ooty strive to continue their traditional practices with very

few people left practicing it. The lifestyle of women has been evolving ever since the ancient times. Change and development are the key words of humanity, and one always advocates progression in the way women live and are treated in every culture. That said, continuing traditional practices and safeguarding culture keeps alive the identity. Indian tribesmen are known to be protective about their traditions and women play a key role in taking forward their cultural identity.

Women of the Toda tribe living near Ooty have a very interesting lifestyle, and they continue to practice the old way of living and strive to carry forward the legacy by practicing ancient practices that they follow. However, even they are dealing with onslaught of lifestyle changes, share the women on the sidelines of their dance performance at Sterling Fern Hill, Ooty. Devi narrates, "Since the time we have been settled in Ooty we are practicing our culture, though we are only 2000 people. We ensure we carry on our legacy by participating in the rituals and conducting few ceremonies that are coming down from generations."

"The elder women in our community are respected a lot; when we take the blessings of an elderly woman, she puts her feet on our head and blesses us. Infact, we take her feet and then place it on our head so that she could bless us. This tradition still continues in our community as we do not want to end this practice." Since the modern trends have been taking their bench in the society people are moving away from their old traditional the same situation is seen with the tribes of Toda. "Since the lifestyle in the city is fetching money, people in our community began to adapt to city lifestyle. They work in cities in order to make more money, but there are few women who still practice our age-old tradition by weaving warm cloths and following other rich traditions during the festive times.

" Regarding the weaving of warm clothes, Devi shares, "The patterns used in a Toda shawl reflect the creativity of Toda women who are

inspired by nature and mythological stories. We women have been practicing this art since ages; the base cotton material, normally bleached and pale white in colour is handwoven in single width and the embroidery is done by counting of threads.

We do not refer to any kind of pattern from a book as we have designed them a hundred times. The shawl that we weave has a visible design on both the sides of the cloth, which gives it a finished look, a little tuft of the thread is left behind while drawing the needle back, which gives a rich look to the cloth.

The ladies here work on fabric with simple darning needle and thread without the assistance of modern tools." The handwoven cloth is pretty famous for its design, "Traditionally, three colours have great significance. The cream/ pale white stands for purity and innocence, red stands for youth and black stands for maturity. The design is usually red and black stripes, and the shawls are used as cover over the clothes that we wear." Apart from the shawls that they design they also have a unique hair style which is styled specially for every occasion.

"We wash our hair and then we roll the hair strings as ringlets. This hair style also makes our hair healthy. We spend hours to get the hair style into shape." Every community has certain kind of rituals to follow when it comes to a wedding ceremony and so does the Toda tribes. There is a little twist on how a Toda man impresses his girl for marriage.

Devi, who has taken the mantle of the spokesperson of her tribe for the day, relates "The woman has the right to choose her husband. So, the man impresses her by lifting a 120 kg stone, which is known as the marriage stone, to impress her girl. And if in case he is not able to lift the stone; he is not eligible for marriage. Women here still practice this

ceremony." While we go through the tribe's unique traditions and lifestyle, we also notice that many of the rituals and dances are only seen during festivals or marriage occasions. However, Ooty being a tourist-rich destination, one can get to see the women of this community in vibrant colours and a cheer on their face to represent their culture to the tourists, who visit them.

11. Chhattisgarh govt for promotion of traditional art forms to boost self-employment



Aakaar-2023, the government-backed special training camp in wood, bamboo and paddy jewellery, has seen enrolment from over 400 people across age groups

The Culture Department of the Chhattisgarh government is currently organising Aakaar-2023, its annual training camp for training and developing skills in various traditional art forms. The camp has successfully attracted people of all age groups, including children, youth, and the elderly, eager to learn and develop their skills in various traditional art forms.

Over 400 trainees currently participate in the camp, receiving training in various traditional art forms to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary for self-employment. The camp, being held regularly since 2005, has been planned to preserve, promote, and create awareness about traditional crafts and arts, besides generating interest among people. This year, the traditional crafts and various arts training camp, Aakaar 2023, is being held from May 1 to May 19 at the Mahant Ghasidas Memorial Museum in Civil Lines, Raipur.

Training camps are currently underway in all the regional headquarters of the state, attracting people of all ages, including children, the elderly, and the youth, who have shown great enthusiasm in participating.

Officials have disclosed that registered participants of the "Aakaar-2023" camp will receive training in an array of art forms, ranging from mural-making, paper mâché, clay, wood and bamboo crafts to sculpture, painting, Mahbubani, tapestry, paddy jewellery-making, dry flowers, glass painting, Godna art, paddy stubble art, terracotta, Rajwar pottery, classical dance, drama, folk dance, jute craft, henna art, cow dung art, Warli painting, Pichwai art, sand art, mandala art, Mandana art, Gond art, Saura art, sketch painting, canvas painting, and instrument building and training.

The participants' artworks and materials will be displayed on the premises following the training, showcasing their newly acquired skills. They will also be awarded certificates for their hard work and dedication. The initiative taken by the Culture Department of the Chhattisgarh government to promote traditional art forms has received a lot of attention and appreciation from the public. Officials said the training camps are an excellent opportunity for people to explore and learn about their rich cultural heritage while enhancing their artistic abilities.

12. Villagers in Kasara Valley deprived of both water and 'water wives'



Young women no longer want to get married to men in Kasara Ghat area, aware that they would be reduced to being beasts of burden

The likelihood of getting the first 'Adivasi' President in the Rashtrapati Bhavan is poor consolation to tribals around Thane. The area boasts of several dams, seven in all, which supply water to Thane, Kalyan and Mumbai. But not a drop of water goes to the adivasis living around the dams. People are also not allowed to drill tube wells because of railway lines and tunnels in the area. The government has also stubbornly refused to arrange for water tankers to provide water in the area. Barely 100 kilometres from Mumbai, these tribals in the valley of Kasara Ghat, claims former Sarpanch Suniti Bai, have been living there since long before Independence.

But getting water has remained a daily nightmare. For the 5,000 tribals living in 12 hamlets, water scarcity starts in February every year and gets progressively worse. But letters, petitions and pleas to local authorities, MLAs, ministers and the CM have had no effect. Men, who go out to the cities for livelihood, depend on the women and children to fetch water. Having to walk several kilometres, often three or more, each way and return with heavy loads of water often make them fall sick. Young boys and girls drop out of school to fetch water, explains Bamanrao Thakre. The men, as in other parts of the state, would marry more than one woman, each time to a younger woman, so that water supply is taken care of.

But young women, especially if they are educated, no longer want to get married to boys in the area. Aware that they would be reduced to being beasts of burden, they give their consent only if the men live in Thane, Kalyan or Mumbai. After struggling in vain to find a suitable bride for five years, admits Rajendra Fodse, his parents eventually lied to his prospective in-laws and claimed that he came home only on weekends.

He himself claims to have given up studies because he had to accompany the women on their daily water errands. "Our day begins and ends with thought of water," he exclaims.

Ironically, there are several medium and big dams in the area like Bhatsa, Vaitarna, Tansa and Bhavali in Shahpur taluka. The dams and reservoirs supply water to adjacent cities of Kalyan, Thane and Mumbai throughout the year. But for the tribals living within a few kilometres, they have been of little use.

The authorities are oblivious to the social and economic cost of depriving the people of water. The women are also at risk as they negotiate highways with speeding vehicles balancing big handas (pots) on their head, reflects Thakre.

Social activist Ulka Mahajan and Indavi Tulpule, who are associated with Shramik Sangathana, point out that the valley falls in a scheduled area for which there are special funds and budget provisions. Villages too have access to funds from local bodies and there is no reason why water tankers cannot be arranged for them.

The only ray of hope is provided by former MLA from Shahpur, Pandurang Barora, who asserts that the Bahuli dam under construction would supply water to these hamlets first.

Till then these people's quest for water and water brides continues.