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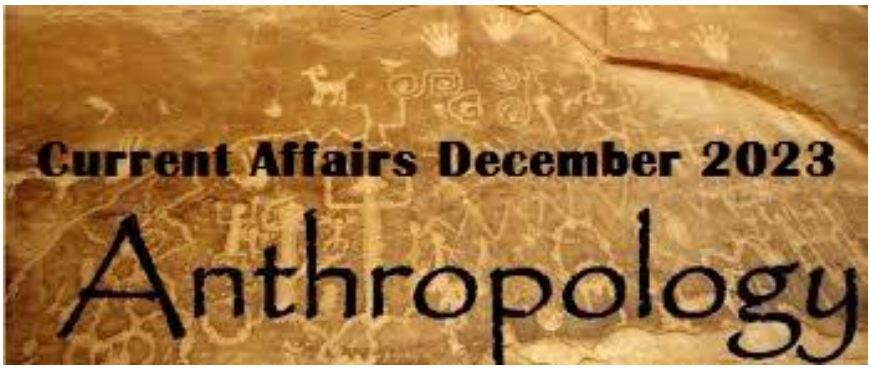

CURRENT AFFAIRS ANTHROPOLOGY

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PAPER -1

PHYSICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. NARMADA MAN TURNS 40: Celebrating RUBY JUBILEE YEAR of a historic find

December 5th, 1982 is indeed an unforgettable day for the Indian prehistory. On this momentous day, on the banks of the river Narmada at **Hathnora** village in Sehore district (nearly 35 kilometres east of Hoshangabad in Madhya Pradesh), team of scientists of the Geological Survey of India (GSI) led by **Dr.Arun Sonakia** stumbled upon what turned out to be the most exciting fossil discovery of a human-like ancestor.

The fossil find was first hard evidence of human evolution in this part of the continent. This changed many perceptions about Indian prehistory.
This fossil, commonly known as "Narmada Man" was recovered from the **Pleistocene a**lluvium. Fossil remains suggest these belong to a robust individual with an erect posture and a well-developed brain.

The general robusticity, the thick and projecting supra-orbital torus and its

occipital protuberance are akin to the **classic Neanderthal group**. But presence of slight sagittal keeling, widely placed Mastoids and, cranial capacity of 1200 cc, bring it closer to the Homo erectus of Java, China,Tanzania, and Kenya.
Some scholars contemplate it to be much closer to **Java man,** while others Want to place it under the genre of 'Archaic Homo sapiens'. This presumption draws its strength From the cultural material identified from the same site.

Kenneth AR Kennedy (Cornell University, Ithaca) tested this hypothesis and showed that 43% of the traits present in the Narmada man are like metric and morphological traits akin to Homo erectus remains. Further explorations and comparisons of each morphological trait with those of the Middle and Late Pleistocene fossils from Africa, Europe, and Asia, prove that the Narmada Specimen is Homo sapiens and not 'evolved' Homo erectus or 'archaic' Homo sapiens. Moreover, this terminology no longer holds any taxonomic significance in the newer trends witnessed in Palaeoanthropology. Besides the taxonomic identification, there are debates about the temporal association of the find.

Antiquity of most of the fossils remains controversial. Thus "Narmada Man" is not an exception. Available dates are based on geological deposits or associated cultural or faunal assemblage. It is very unfortunate that the fossil itself has not been dated even after 40 years since its discovery.
Some scholars take the Narmada fossil as a representative of the **late Homo erectus** category.

Arun Sonakia discoverer and the then Director of GSI's palaeontology division, puts the age of the fossil at 500,000 to 600,000 years. His judgement is based on vertebrate fossils seen in the vicinity of the finds. Paleo-magnetic dating studies done at the Geological Survey of India also support the same dates. However, studies carried out at the Physical Research Laboratory at Ahmedabad, places the antiquity within the middle to late middle Pleistocene. They gave a time range of aapproximately 250,000 to 150,000 years. These studies used the artifact typology and stratigraphic adating of the deposit to date the Narmada fossil.

Rajeev Patnaik (Panjab University), and his colleagues including Parth Chauhan (from Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Mohali) along with some others have conducted extensive explorations in the Narmada valley. They found a wide array of stone blades, flakes, choppers, hand-axes, picks, cleavers, micro-fossils and fossil teeth and bones. In their opinion, given the mixed nature of the archaeological and allied evidence, the "Narmada Man" may be much

younger than 250,000 years as believed earlier. They regard it to be as young as 50,000 years old. Precise dating of "Narmada Man" is still elusive but critical for its precise position in the cycle of human evolution.

One of the most debated puzzles in Indian prehistory is how and when did early humans come here, what were they like, and what other creatures coexisting with them did?

Michael Petraglia, (Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena, Germany) finds that most fauna form the region are >60 kg. in weight. This is attributed to taphonomy processes In fluvial contexts explaining paucity of lower and middle Pleistocene fossil hominids from South Asia. Any human fossil finds from the region is just a matter of sheer chance. Given this, it is Pertinent to bank on archaeological research rather than anthropological evidence to draw any Inferences about hominids from the region.

Fortunately, very wide range of stone tools used by the extinct hominid groups are coming from all over the sub-continent. These stone tools are as old as 800,000 years and as young as 10,000 Years, spanning a large range of the stone-age. Outstanding work of K.Paddayya (Deccan College PGRI, Pune) at Isampur, Hunsgi valley of Karnataka, proves existence of pre-modern species, Homo erectus from 1.2 million years. Shanti Pappu's team (Sharma Centre for Heritage Education,Chennai) at the archaeological site of Attirampakkam, takes the date further back to 1.7-1.5 million Years. Probably, these finds belong to the family of Homo erectus that came out of Africa.

This evokes the question, if "Narmada Man" is a descendent of Isampur-Attirampakkam-like Homo erectus? There are still many puzzles – many gaps in our knowledge which need to be filled. What happened in the hundreds of thousands of years that fall between today and these timelines? Who lived in the landmass between these regions, from where they came, how were they surviving and interacting with the other human/non-human groups?

We do not know when modern human groups first arrived, how many dispersals were there. We don't even know if there were any other hominin species in India when modern humans arrived, and if they inter-bred with these pre-existing hominin groups in the region. The existence of stone tools in diverse geographical regions, however, undoubtedly proves that the sub-continent was home to one (or more) unknown hominin species, fossils of which we have not yet discovered!

PREHISTORY TALKS- What the present scenario tells us?

Anatomically modern humans originated in Africa by about 200,000 years ago. Apparently, there were two dispersals of these modern forms of humans (Anatomically Modern Homo Sapiens –AMHS) in the Indian sub-continent. The first dispersal of AMHS took place between 130,000–115,000 years ago, but they either died out or retreated. A second dispersal took place, either before or after the Toba event, which happened between 69,000 and 77,000 years ago. There are several sites in the peninsular India giving evidence of the Toba ash. One of these is Ash layers at Bori, Ahmednagar district. Deccan College team has contributed significantly to the studies of Toba ash.

To sum up, it is proven that the existing humans have originated from the African Mitochondrial eve who lived on earth about 2,00,000 years ago. Human migrations (of AMHS) - Out of Africa- took place across two timelines. 'Out of Africa Part 1 migration' happened about 1,30,000 years ago. Most researchers believe it be a failed migration in which only a small group moved. The group either died out or returned to Africa. 'Out of Africa Part 2 migration', happened after the Toba eruption. It is then, as the predominant theory went, a small group of humans crossed the Red Sea, moved along the Arabian Peninsula, India, and Southeast Asia, and reached Australia about 50,000 years ago.

However, Jwalapuram excavations provide some evidence the first migration might not have been a total failure. Though it needs to be substantiated. It is therefore extremely important to have precise dating of the "Narmada Man" fossil itself to put it correctly in evolutionary ladder. There are several presumptions as of now.
First, it could be more evolved than 'Homo erectus'. Second it may be a representative of the first batch of AMHS who survived. And third it could belong to the second AMHS batch coming to the sub-continent around 65,000 years ago. We all are still waiting for the confirmation!

Yet another grave concern that exists in the minds of Indian prehistorians need to be spelled out while celebrating the 40th anniversary of the "Narmada Skull". Palaeoanthropology is rarely practised in India in its original form through multi-disciplinary approaches. There is gross negligence of maintaining All the sites and the recovered treasures are poorly maintained and grossly neglected. Besides population pressure and intensive agriculture along with developmental projects like dam constructions, road constructions, mining and oil drilling

activities have taken a toll on these sites and study of fossil. Hundreds of paleoanthropological and stone age sites are getting destroyed across the subcontinent.

The discovery of "Narmada Man" has put India on the world fossil map. It proved the presence of early humans in the subcontinent and filled a void in our knowledge about human evolution.It has been 40 years since the discovery, but it isstill to appear in the Indian school textbooks. Kids in our schools learn about Java Man and Peking Man but hardly anyone knows about the "Narmada Man". And, very important administratively andbacademically, the 'issues' related to the 'ownership' of the find, need to be resolved among the GSI, ASI, and AnSI.

SOCIO – CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1.'Animism' recognizes how animals, places and plants have power over humans – and it's finding renewed interest around the world

A movement known as **"new animism,"** which seeks to secure personhood rights for nonhuman beings through legal means, is gaining a following around the globe.
New animist environmental activists are not the only ones using the term. Animism itself has become fashionable. Some spirituality bloggers talk about animism as a way to deepen one's spiritual relationship to nature.
A history of the term

The term animism was coined by an early anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor, in 1870. Tylor argued that Darwin's ideas of evolution could be applied to human societies; he classified religions according to their level of development.
He defined animism as a belief in souls: the existence of human souls after death, but also the belief that entities Western perspectives deemed inanimate, like mountains, rivers and trees, had souls.

Why, then, are environmental activists embracing this concept
Animism is not a religion one can convert to but rather a label used for worldviews and practices that acknowledge relationships between nature and the animal world that have power over humans and must be respected.

These practices can be religious rituals, but they can also be forms of environmental care, farming practices or protests, such as those conducted by the water protectors at Standing Rock, known as the No Dakota Access Pipeline, also called by the hashtag #NoDAPL. Protests like the #NoDAPL aren't what most people are used to thinking of as "religion," and, as a result, media accounts often miss the obligations to place and land that motivate protesters.
New Zealand's 2017 act recognizing the Whanganui River as a legal person, the culmination of decades of Maori activism, could be described as animism taking a legal form.

Additionally, when Indigenous practices are labeled animist religion, it is easy to overlook the very real biological and ecological scientific knowledge of these communities. Animist practices are as variable as the peoples and places engaging in such relationships. Indigenous and animist

perspectives illustrate that there are many different relationships possible between humans and the world around them, and many environmentalists are finding these alternatives instructive, despite the troubled history of the term.

2. Shattering the myth of men as hunters and women as gatherers

Analysis of data from dozens of foraging societies around the world shows that women hunt in at least 79 percent of these societies, opposing the widespread belief that men exclusively hunt and women exclusively gather.
A common belief holds that, among foraging populations, men have typically hunted animals while women gathered plant products for food.

However, mounting archaeological evidence from across human history and prehistory is challenging this paradigm; for instance, women in many societies have been found buried alongside big-game hunting tools. Some researchers have suggested that women's role as hunters was confined to the past, with more recent foraging societies following the

paradigm of men as hunters and women as gatherers. To investigate that possibility, Anderson and colleagues analyzed data from the past 100 years on 63 foraging societies around the world, including societies in North and South America, Africa, Australia, Asia, and the Oceanic region.

They found that women hunt in 79 percent of the analyzed societies, regardless of their status as mothers. More than 70 percent of female hunting appears to be intentional—as opposed to opportunistic killing of animals encountered while performing other activities, and intentional hunting by women appears to target game of all sizes, most often large game.

The analysis also revealed that women are actively involved in teaching hunting practices and that they often employ a greater variety of weapon choice and hunting strategies than men.

These findings suggest that, in many foraging societies, women are skilled hunters and play an instrumental role in the practice, adding to the evidence opposing long-held perceptions about gender roles in foraging societies. The authors note that these stereotypes have influenced previous archaeological studies, with, for instance, some researchers reluctant to interpret objects buried with women as hunting tools. They call for reevaluation of such evidence and caution against misapplying the idea of men as hunters and women as gatherers in future research.
The authors add: “Evidence from around the world shows that women participate in subsistence hunting in the majority of cultures.”

PAPER - 2

INDIAN & TRIBAL ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Rajasthan's Kalbeliya Dance

- Recently, at the Rajasthan International Folk Festival, performers showcased the Kalbeliya dance.

Kalbeliya Dance

- Kalbeliya Dance is a traditional Indian dance form that originated in the state of Rajasthan.
- It is a vibrant, energetic dance that is performed by members of the Kalbeliya, a nomadic tribe of snake charmers in Rajasthan.
- It is a highly sensuous dance, with the dancers performing intricate footwork and swaying movement of their arms and body.
- In 2010, the Kalbelia folk songs and dances of Rajasthan were declared a part of its Intangible Heritage List by the UNESCO.

Performance details

- The dancers are women in flowing black skirts who dance and twirl, replicating the movements of a serpent.
- They wear an upper body cloth called an angrakhi and a headcloth known as the odhani; the lower body cloth is called a lehenga.
- All these clothes are of mixed red and black hues and embroidered.
- The male participants play musical instruments, such as the 'pungi', the dufli, been, the khanjari – a percussion instrument, morchang, khuralio and the dholak to create the rhythm on which the dancers perform.
- The dancers are tattooed in traditional designs and wear jewelry and garments richly embroidered with small mirrors and silver threads.
- As the performance progresses, the rhythm becomes faster and faster and so does the dance.

Features of the Kalbeliya Dance

- **Rapid footwork:** The fast, intricate footwork of the Kalbeliya dance is the highlight of this folk dance. The dancers move their feet in quick, sharp movements that form intricate patterns on the floor.
- **Swirling skirts:** The colorful skirts of the female dancers swirl gracefully as they move, adding to the beauty of the dance.
- **Hand and arm movements**: The dancers use their hands and arms to create graceful, fluid movements that are integral to the dance.
- **Singing:** Kalbeliya dancers often sing along to the music as they dance, adding to the atmosphere of the performance.
- **Cymbals and drums:** Traditional Kalbeliya music is accompanied by drums and cymbals, which help to create a lively, energizing atmosphere.

 Kalbeliya Tribe:

- Kalbeliya tribe people **were once professional snake handlers,** today they **evoke their former occupation in music and dance** that is evolving in new and creative ways.
- They **live a nomadic life and belong to the scheduled tribes.**
- The largest number of the population of Kalbeliyas is in **Pali district, then Ajmer, Chittorgarh and Udaipur district (Rajasthan).**

2. Delimitation Commission for Tribal Communities

The **Supreme Court** recently asked the government to set up fresh **Delimitation Commission** for ensuring a proportional representation of the **Scheduled Castes (SCs)** and **Scheduled Tribes (STs).**

Why did the Supreme Court ask for a Delimitation Commission?

- The **Supreme Court** (SC) held the plea for **proportionate representation** of the **Limbu and Tamang tribal** communities in the assemblies of **Sikkim and West Bengal.**
- It asked the government to set up the **delimitation panel** as it **cannot direct Parliament** to **amend or make laws** for proper representation to other communities that form part of the STs.
- This would lead to **addition in the reservation** and the **judiciary intervening** into the legislative domain, against **Article 50** of the Constitution.

- To deal with proportionate representation of communities in the West Bengal Assembly, it would require using the power under the **Delimitation Act, 2002.**
    - The law provides for **a readjustment of the allocation of seats** in state assemblies and Union Territory having a legislative Assembly after **every census** under **Article 82.**
- There were no elected ST members from the **three-hill area sub-divisions of Darjeeling district,** in the **Tribes Advisory Council** established in West Bengal.
- The state Assembly election in 2016 had no reserved ST seat so, Articles **170 and 332** were not implemented as notified in **census 2011.**
- The delimited Assembly seats in **the Darjeeling hills** presently consist of **elected non-ST members.**
- This issue shall be discussed with the **Chief Election Commissioner (CEC)** and seek response accordingly.

Constitutional and legal mandates for proportional representation of STs:

- **Additional seats** have to be made available in the state Assembly of West Bengal for the Scheduled Tribes in order to accommodate the principle of **proportional representation.**
- The Union government must take recourse to power under the **Delimitation Act, 2002** to ensure that the provisions under **articles 332 and 333** of the Constitution are duly implemented.
- It had said the demand of the communities for the grant of proportional representation has a **constitutional foundation,** which can be found in articles **330, 332 and 14.**
- **Article 330:** Reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the House of People.
- **Article 332:** Reservation of seats for SCs and STs in legislative assemblies of states.
- **Article 333:** Representation of the Anglo-Indian community in Legislative assemblies of states, lies in the discretion of the Governor.
- **Article 14:** The state shall not deny any person equality before law or equal protection of law.

- There was a **rise in the ST population in Sikkim and West Bengal** and not reserving seats for them proportionate to the growth amounted to a **denial of their constitutional rights.**
- The apex court has the **power of judicial review** (Article 136) to determine whether a provision enacted by Parliament is unconstitutional.

About the Tribes of West Bengal and Sikkim:

- Population of the **Limbu and Tamang communities** in Sikkim was 20.6% in 2001 and had risen to **33.8% in 2011.**
- The **ST population rose** to 21.5% in 2011 from 12.69% in 2001 in Darjeeling area of West Bengal.

Limbu Tribe:

- The second numerous tribe of the indigenous people called **Kiranti,** who live in **Nepa**l (east of Arun River) and Indian states of **Sikkim, West Bengal, and Assam**.
- They are of **Mongolian origin** and speak Kiranti group of **Tibeto-Burman languages** using the **Kirat-Sirijonga script**, believed to be invented in the **9th century.**
- They built **stone houses** surrounded by **dry-cultivated fields** of rice, wheat, corn and cattle.
- Divided into **patrilineal clans**, the families are led by a headman, or subba, who is often a **returned Gurkha soldier** and follow **Tibetan Buddhism** under chief god, Niwa Buma.

Tamang Tribe:

- It is the **largest ethnic group** predominantly based **in Nepal**, but some communities reside in **Sikkim and Darjeeling District, West Bengal,** migrating from **Tibet** around 3000 years ago.
- They are mostly farmers and grow **millet, corn, potatoes, wheat and barley** along with cattle.
- Their territory was controlled with the **kipat land system**, where a clan had permanent communal rights over its settlement and cultivation area but later abolished.

- They celebrate Tamang New Year in Sonam **Lhochhar Festival**, **Saga Dawa**- the holiest Buddhist festival and **Dashain** in September-October based on **Nepal Sambat calendar.**

3. PM-JANMAN Scheme for PVTG's

A recent announcement of the Pradhan Mantri-Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) aims to address the developmental needs of PVTGs with a substantial financial allocation.

Issues:

- Population Contradictions:
  - Discrepancies in population data between the Tribal Affairs Ministry and the Census data raise concerns.
  - The State-wise Census data indicated a 40% decline in PVTG numbers in nine States and Union Territories.
- PVTG Distribution:
  - PVTGs are present in 18 States and Union Territories, with Odisha having the highest number.
  - The last comprehensive Census in 2001 reported around 27.6 lakh PVTG individuals.

- Limited Information:
    - PVTGs face challenges due to their small population, lack of progress, and remote living conditions.
    - Inadequate infrastructure and administrative support contribute to their vulnerability.

Significance:

- PM-JANMAN Scheme:
    - A 24,000 crore initiative to uplift PVTGs by providing basic facilities like roads, power, housing, and connectivity.
    - Aims to address the specific needs of 22,000 PVTG villages across India.
- Development Mission Goals:
    - Allocation includes building pucca homes, constructing roads, providing water, medical units, anganwadi centers, hostels, and more.
    - Emphasis on vocational and skill training, forest produce trading, solar power, and street lights.
- Presidential Involvement:
    - President Droupadi Murmu's special interest in overseeing plans demonstrates high-level commitment.
- As announced in the Budget Speech 2023-24 to improve socio-economic conditions of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), **Pradhan Mantri PVTG of Development Mission** will be launched.
- This will saturate PVTG households and habitations with basic facilities such as safe housing, clean drinking water and sanitation, improved access to education, health and nutrition, road and telecom connectivity, and sustainable livelihood opportunities.
- An amount of Rs.15,000 crore will be made available to implement the Mission in the next three years under the Development Action Plan for the Scheduled Tribes (DAPST).
- India has ST population of 10.45 crore as per 2011 census, out of which 75 communities located in 18 States and the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands have been categorized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

- These PVTGs continue to face vulnerability in social, economic and educational fields.
- The PM-JANMAN (comprising Central Sector and Centrally Sponsored Schemes) to focus on 11 critical interventions through 9 Ministries.

4. Can Ancient Indian Tribe save by land Rights and Education

Scattered across 31 remote hilltop villages on a mountain range that towers 1,500 to 4,000 feet above sea level, in the Malkangiri district of India's eastern Odisha state, the Upper Bonda people are considered one of this country's most ancient tribes, having barely altered their lifestyle in over a thousand years.

Resistant to contact with the outside world and fiercely skeptical of modern development, this community of under 7,000 people is struggling to maintain its way of life and provide for a younger generation that is growing increasingly frustrated with poverty – 90 percent of Bonda people live on less than a dollar a day - and inter-communal violence.

3Recent government schemes to improve the Bonda people's access to land titles is bringing change to the community, and opening doors to high-school education, which was hitherto difficult or impossible for many to access.

But with these changes come questions about the future of the tribe, whose overall population growth rate between 2001 and 2010 was just 7.65 percent according to two surveys conducted by the Odisha government's Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI).

First land rights, then education

In a windowless mud hut in the Bonda Ghati, a steep-sloping mountainous region in southwest Odisha, Saniya Kirsani talks loudly and drunkenly about his plans for the acre of land that he recently acquired the title to.

The 50-year-old Bonda man has illusions of setting up a mango orchard in his native Tulagurum village, which will enable him to produce the fruity liquor that keeps him in a state of intoxication. His wife, Hadi Kirsani, harbours far more realistic plans. For her, the land deeds mean first and foremost that their 14-year-old son, Buda Kirsani, can finally go back to school.

He dropped out after completing fifth grade in early 2013, bereft of hopes for further education because the nearest public high school in Mudulipada was unaffordable to his family.

Moreover, he would have had to walk 12 km, crossing hill ranges and navigating steep terrain, to get to his classroom every day. Admission to the local tribal resident school, also located in Mudulipada, required a land ownership document that would certify the family's tribal status, which they did not possess.

The Kirsani family had been left out of a wave of reforms in 2010 under the Forest Rights Act, which granted 1,248 Upper Bonda families land titles but left 532 households landless.

Last October, with the help of Landesa, a global non-profit organisation working on land rights for the poor, Buda's family finally extracted the deed to their land from the Odisha government. Carefully placing Buda's only two sets of worn clothes into a bag, Hadi struggles to hold back the tears welling up in her eyes as

she tells IPS that her son is now one of 31 children from the 44-household village who, for the first time ever, has the ability to study beyond primarily school.

She is not alone in her desire to educate her child. Literacy among Upper Bonda men is a miserable 12 percent, while female literacy is only six percent, according to a 2010 SCSTRTI baseline survey, compared to India's national male literacy rate of 74 percent and female literacy of 65 percent. For centuries, the ability to read and write was not a skill the Bonda people sought. Their ancient Remo language has no accompanying script and is passed down orally.

As hunters and foragers, the community has subsisted for many generations entirely off the surrounding forests, bartering goods like millet, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, yams, fruits, berries and wild spinach in local markets. Up until very recently, most Upper Bondas wove and bartered their own cloth made from a plant called ‘kereng', in addition to producing their own brooms from wild grass. Thus they had little need to enter mainstream society.

But a wave of deforestation has degraded their land and the streams on which they depend for irrigation. Erratic rainfall over the last decade has affected crop yields, and the forest department's refusal to allow them to practice their traditional ‘slash and burn' cultivation has made it difficult for the community to feed itself as it has done for hundreds of years.

Mainstreaming: helping or hurting the community?

Since 1976, with the establishment of the Bonda Development Agency, efforts have been made to bring the Upper Bonda people into the mainstream, providing education, better sanitation and drinking water facilities, and land rights.

"Land ownership enables them to stand on their own feet for the purpose of livelihood, and empowers them, as their economy is predominantly limited to the land and forests," states India's National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST), a key policy advisory body.

Efforts to mainstream the Bonda people suffered a setback in the late 1990s, when left-wing extremists deepened the community's exclusion and poverty by turning the Bonda mountain range into an important operating base along India's so-called ‘Red Corridor', which stretches across nine states in the country's central and eastern regions and is allegedly rife with Maoist rebels.

Still, Odisha's tribal development minister Lal Bihari Himirika is confident that new schemes to uplift the community will bear fruit.

"Upon completion, the '5000-hostel scheme' will provide half a million tribal boys and girls education and mainstreaming," he told IPS on the sidelines of the launch of Plan International's 'Because I Am A Girl' campaign in Odisha's capital, Bhubaneswar, last year.

The state's 9.6 million tribal people constitute almost a fourth of its total population. Of these tribal groups, the Upper Bonda people are a key concern for the government and have been named a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PTG) as a result of their low literacy rates, declining population and practice of pre-agricultural farming.

Social activists like 34-year-old Dambaru Sisa, the first ever Upper Bonda to be elected into the state legislature in 2014, believe mainstreaming the Bonda community is crucial for the entire group's survival. Orphaned as a child and educated at a Christian missionary school in Malkangiri, Sisa now holds a double Masters' degree in mathematics and law, and is concerned about his people's future.

"Our cultural identity, especially our unique Remo dialect must be preserved," he told IPS. "At the same time, with increased awareness, customs and superstitions harming our people will slowly be eradicated." He cited the Upper Bonda people's customary marriages – with women generally marrying boys who are roughly ten years younger – as one of the practices harming his community.

marriages, Bonda women marry boys who are seven to 10 years their junior. Typically, a 22-year-old woman will be wed to a 15-year-old boy. Credit: Manipadma Jena. Women traditionally manage the household, while men and boys are responsible for hunting and gathering food. To do so, they are trained in archery but possession of weapons often leads to brawls within the community itself as a result of Bonda men's quick tempers, their penchant for alcohol and fierce protection of their wives.

A decade ago, an average of four men were killed by their own sons or nephews, usually in fights over their wives, according to Manoranjan Mahakul, a government official with the Odisha Tribal Empowerment & Livelihood Programme (OTELP), who has worked here for over 20 years. Even now, several

Bonda men are in prison for murder, Mahakul told IPS, though lenient laws allow for their early release after three years.

"High infant mortality, alcoholism and unsanitary living conditions, in close proximity to pigs and poultry, combined with a lack of nutritional food, superstitions about diseases and lack of medical facilities are taking their toll," Sukra Kirsani, Landesa's community resource person in Tulagurum village.

The tribe's drinking water is sourced from streams originating in the hills. All families practice open defecation, usually close to the streams, which results in diarrhoea epidemics during the monsoon seasons.

Despite a glaring need for change, experts say it will not come easy.

"Getting Bonda children to high school is half the battle won," Sisa stated. "However, there are question marks on the quality of education in residential schools. While the list of enrolled students is long, in actuality many are not in the hostels. Some run away to work in roadside eateries or are back home," he added. The problem, Sisa says, is that instead of being taught in their mother tongue, students are forced to study in the Odia language or a more mainstream local tribal dialect, which none of them understand.

The government has responded to this by showing a willingness to lower the required qualifications for teachers in order to attract Bondas teachers to the classrooms. Still, more will have to be done to ensure the even development of this dwindling tribe. "The abundant funds pouring in for Bondas' development need to be transparently utilised so that the various inputs work in synergy and show results," Sisa concluded.

5. Gujjar, Bakerwals call off agitation against Paharis' ST status

The centre's decision to grant ST status to Paharis, and other groups like the "Paddari tribe," "Kolis," and "Gadda Brahmans" has drawn the ire of the Gujjar-Bakerwal community, who are the third largest ethnic group in Jammu Kashmir, after Kashmiris and Dogras.

Socio economic characteristics of these 'Communities'

 The Gujjar-Bakerwal tribes and the Pahari community share a similar social and cultural milieu and together form a majority in the Pir Panjal region.

 The Gujjars mostly live a nomadic life by shuttling between Kashmir and Jammu regions with their livestock of buffaloes, sheep and goats.

 On the other hand, Paharis are a socially stratified – a mostly financially well-off and culturally moored – community with caste and other ethnic divisions, who are joined by the thread of language.

A delegation of Paharis met the Union home minister seeking ST status for the community. In January 2020, the Paharis were given a 4% reservation in the OBC category.

The tribal group's contention is that the inclusion of these groups into the ST category is not justified as "these groups don't fit the criteria to fall into the ST category and upper castes can't be tribals." They contend that opportunities for education and employment may be lost due to the inclusion of Paharis and other castes in the ST category.

They fear that if Paharis are given the ST status, they will have to compete for jobs, scholarships, and other benefits under the category that was previously their domain.

6. Uniform Civil Code: India tribes fear for identity over proposed law

Chaibasa, a small village in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand dominated by the Ho tribal community. The 40-year-old then heads to a special court - set up two years ago to deal with civil matters of local tribespeople - where he is fighting a land dispute case.

In India, special courts for tribal communities have been established to protect their culture and distinct identity. While there is no official figure on their number, a similar system is found in the north-eastern states where tribal courts decide on matters of marriage, divorce, adoption and inheritance based on their own personal laws and customs.

At the court which Mr Jonko visits, there is no lawyer or judge. Three village leaders - one named by the complainant, one by the respondent and the third named by the local administration - hand out "verdicts".

Mr Jonko says he prefers going there because the staff comprises people from his community and all the cases are heard in the local Ho language.

Ho is one of the many indigenous languages spoken in Jharkhand where 27% of the population is made of tribespeople.

But Mr Jonko now worries that his village's unique justice system would cease to exist.

The fears were sparked earlier this year when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) proposed a plan to enact a Uniform Civil Code or UCC - a single personal law for all citizens irrespective of religion, sex, gender and sexual orientation. At the moment, there is no clarity on the contents of UCC as there is no draft of the law yet.

But the government argues that a common code is necessary to achieve gender justice; equality through uniform application of personal laws in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance; and to foster national unity. The BJP, in one of its election manifestoes, said there "cannot be gender equality till such time India adopts a Uniform Civil Code".

Critics, however, say that any attempt to push for it would divide communities and lead to a loss of their distinct identity and culture.

The proposal is largely seen as a counter to personal laws of Muslims - which the government says are "regressive" - as it seeks to consolidate Hindu votes for the BJP ahead of the 2024 general election.

But it has triggered a wave of anxiety among tribespeople who fear that the proposal interferes with their centuries-old practices and customs.

"Right now, a non-tribal person cannot buy land in our village. With the UCC anyone would be able to do that," Mr Jonko says. "Our culture and tribal practices will be be wiped away."In Jharkhand, special laws have been in force for decades to protect the distinct identity of the state's 8.6 million tribespeople.

This includes a 1908 law that prohibits the transfer of tribal land to non-tribal communities to ensure community ownership, and a 1876 law which prohibits non-Santhal people from buying Santhal land without the

permission of the district magistrate. The Santhals are a tribe that occupy the area of Jharkhand bordering West Bengal state.

Similar laws also exist in the north-eastern states, where autonomous district councils are set up to protect the land and culture of tribal communities. Santosh Kido, professor at Xavier's College in Ranchi city, says that tribespeople fear that a UCC would wipe away their identity. "These people identify as tribal because of their distinct culture, tradition and customary laws. If the government puts all of these in one basket there will be nothing left for them," he says.

Dayamani Barla, an activist who has been fighting for the rights of tribespeople in Jharkhand, agrees with the assessment.

She says the tribal system of governance and self-rule is deeply connected with their customs and any attempt to do away with that would undermine their autonomy. "Besides, how can you have one law for a diverse country like India?" she asks. However, supporters of a UCC argue that it is a much needed reform to end discriminatory practices prevalent in local traditions and customs.

In most tribal societies of Jharkhand for instance, daughters have no share in her father or husband's property. "A common set of personal laws would bring gender equality among tribespeople," says Amar Kumar Chowdhary, professor at Ranchi Technical University.

Mr Chowdhary adds that a UCC would also help to integrate these communities better with "the national mainstream".

"If it is implemented properly, it will be good for everyone. We will all move forward together," he said.

There is no clarity on how much of this would actually happen under the new law or when will it be implemented. But tribespeople in Jharkhand say they are bracing for an uncertain future. "We don't know much, we only hear about things on the TV," Mr Jonko says. "But we are poor and helpless and we know we won't be able to stop it if the UCC is implemented."

7. Hornbill Festival 2023

The **24th Edition** of the **Hornbill Festival** has been started at the **Naga Heritage Village 'Kisama'** on 1st December 2023.

- The **United States of America**, **Germany**, and **Columbia** are the country partners and **Assam** is the partner state for this year.

About Hornbill Festival:

- The **Hornbill Festival** is an **annual festival** celebrated from **1 to 10 December** in **Nagaland**.
- It represents **all ethnic groups of Nagaland**, thus also called the **Festival of Festivals**.

- It has been organised by the **government of Nagaland** since the year **2000**.
- **Aim:** To **encourage inter-ethnic interaction** and to promote **cultural heritage** of Nagaland.
- The festival is named after the **Indian hornbill** but it is **not** the state bird of Nagaland.
    - State bird of Nagaland is the **Blyth's tragopan**, an endangered species of pheasant.

      Hornbill is displayed in most of the state's **tribes**, tribal **traditions**, **dances**, and **songs** and symbolises **fidelity**, **beauty,** and **grace** in Naga folklore.

- The **inaugural day** of Hornbill Festival also coincides with **Nagaland's statehood day**.
    - **Nagaland** became the **16th state of the Indian Union** on December 1, **1963**.
- This festival ensures that **locals make good money just before Christmas**, which is biggest and most-anticipated festival of Nagaland.
    - **96**% of its population is **Christian**.

8. Garo Dakmanda and Larnai pottery

Garo Dakmanda and **Larnai pottery** has recently received **GI** (Geographical Indication) **tag**.

About the Garo Dakmanda:

- The Garo Dakmanda is a **handwoven**, **ankle**-length **lower garment** that is part of the traditional attire of **women** of the **Garo community** in **Meghalaya**.
- It consists of a **thick**, **unstitched cloth** with a **6–10-inch** border at the bottom.
- It is worn mostly on **formal** occasions as a **wraparound skirt**.
- It was traditionally woven from a **long-staple cotton** "**khildig**", which is native to the Garo hills.
    - With time, it was made from fibres such as **acrylic yarn** or **silk**, particularly **Mulberry**, **Eri** and **Muga silks**.
- Its border typically features a woven pattern with **concentric diamond shapes** called the **muikron**, meaning "**eye**" in Garo.

About the Larnai pottery:

- The Larnai pottery is a traditional pottery produced in **Jaintia Hills** of Meghalaya.
- It is locally known as **khiew larnai** or **khiew ranei**.
- The 2 kinds of clay used are **khyndew long** (black Clay) which is obtained from **Sung valley** and **khyndew khluit**.
- The clay is mixed and then pounded using a **wooden pounder** known as **synrai**.
- The clay is then **moulded** and **sundried**.
- When the pots are ready, they are **fired**, after which they are **coloured** using the **bark** of the "**Sohliya"** tree.

9. Hatti Community

Members of the **Hatti community** have demanded tribal status and given a seven-day ultimatum to the **Himachal Pradesh government**.

Hatti Community:

- Hatti is a **close-knit community**, that derived their name from their **traditional occupation** of selling home-grown crops, vegetables, meat, and wool at markets known as 'haats'.
- **Hatti men** traditionally don a distinctive **white headgear** on ceremonial occasions.
- Over the years, they **suffered topographical disadvantages** and even neglect.
- They are settled mainly in **Shillai**, **Sangrah**, and **Kamrau** (**trans-Giri areas**), bordering the Jaunsar-Bawar hilly region of **Garhwal region** of Uttarakhand.
- They live in **154 panchayat areas** and numbered **2.5 lakh members** as per 2011 Census.
- Their **present population** is estimated at **around 3 lakh**.

- They follow a very rigid hierarchy, broadly divided into **two categories** of **Bhat** and **Khash** (higher status) and **Badhois** in the lower ranking.
- The community is governed by a traditional council called **Khumbli**, similar to the '**khaps'** of Haryana.
- Their agitation **started in 1968** when the government declared **Jaunsar-Babur as a Scheduled Tribe area** and **ignored Trans Giri area people** of the same region.
- The recent government has granted **tribal status to the Hatti community**.
- There are **two Hatti clans,** in Trans-Giri and Jaunsar Bawar, have similar traditions, and inter-marriages are common.
- However, a fairly rigid caste system operates in the community — the **Bhat and Khash are upper castes**, and the **Badhois are below them,** and inter-caste marriages have traditionally been discouraged.
- The Hattis are **governed by a traditional council called 'khumbli'** which, like the 'khaps' of Haryana, decides community matters.
- The Khumbli's power has remained unchallenged despite the establishment of the Panchayati raj system.
- They have **sizeable presence in about nine Assembly seats in the Sirmaur and Shimla regions.** According to the 2011 Census of India, the total tribal population of Himachal Pradesh is 3,92,126, which is **5.7% of the total population of the state.**

10. Mahua liquor is witnessing a rebrand, but legal framework protecting tribal rights across India is needed

Tribal world is intertwined with mahua but it still suffers from false colonial notions of being a lowly toxic liquor

A rustic hum brimmed my ears as I stepped into the courtyard of Shuku Mandi, a resident of a small Santhal village in West Bengal. He greeted me with a broad smile and promptly offered a glass full of mahua liquor. “We have a new member in our family. The women in the family and neighbourhood are singing the traditional songs of the name-giving ceremony,” he answered, anticipating my curiosity.

Sipping the freshly brewed mahua spirit, which is essential on such social occasions, I was reminded of how the tribal world is intertwined with mahua. Though my experience was in a small Santhal village of West Bengal, this is true for all Adivasi villages in central and adjoining India.

Gond, Santhal, Baiga, Munda, Ho, Orao and all other communities spread in at least 12 states have a strong connection with mahua. Say, for example,

for a Gondi Adivasi, the social rituals of *Tonda* (birth), *Manda* (wedding) and *Konda* (death) will cease without mahua.

Milieu of an Adivasi society is broken without it. What used to be a cultural identity for them now perishes as a lowly booze, associated with adulteration, lack of morality, danger and what not. This relegation was not normal but planned — just another ploy by the British to exploit Indians.

Till around the late 1800s, brewing mahua liquor was just another household chore for indigenous families. The British Raj saw this as an untapped opportunity to generate revenue.

They deemed it a low-quality toxicant, labelled it as a threat to public health and morality and with two successive acts — Bombay Abkari Act, 1878 and Mhowra Act, 1892 — they banned not only the production of mahua, but also collection and storage of mahua flowers. Thus, they succeeded in controlling the production of local spirit and gathered revenue from alcohol imported from Britain and Germany.

That colonial hangover still continues. Practitioners and scholars who are aware of the history of mahua, its cultural importance and economic significance for the Adivasis see huge potential in it and call for a change in policy.

In India, current excise policies categorise liquor as Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL), Imported Liquor (IL) and Country Liquor (CL). CL is bound by the antiquated laws of 1878 and 1892, which forbid non-Adivasis from consuming or producing it and restrict Adivasis from producing it within a certain limit. The introduction of a new category as ‘heritage liquor’ and careful articulation of the policy can do wonders to actualise its potential.

After perishing for centuries, it seems that mahua is slowly regaining its space.

In 2022, the excise and tribal affairs ministry of the Madhya Pradesh (MP) government issued a notification for the production of mahua liquor as

'heritage liquor'. As a first step, they tested the market, serving it without charge to customers in hotels and bars run by MP Tourism Corporation.

It was commercially launched in May 2023. Aniruddha Mookerjee, advisor for heritage liquor, MP government, said the right to commercially distil mahua spirit has been given only to the Scheduled Tribe Self Help Groups in the state.

Fifty per cent of these groups must comprise women. In two districts of MP, Alirajpur and Dindori, Bhilala tribe of village Kavcha and Gond tribe of Bhaka Mal village are producing this artisanal spirit in small batches under the brand names Mond and Mohulo, respectively.

This policy initiative of the MP government is remarkable as it provides credence to the age-old skill of the tribes, helps to monetise it and rightfully gives the right to do so only to tribes who have been traditionally distilling it. "A positive air needs to be created around mahua to bring it out from its false association with hooch, poisoning and death — the MP government's policy move is a bold step in that direction," he added.

In 2018, entrepreneurs Desmond Nazareth and Conrad Braganza introduced a brand of mahua spirit as an ode to India's heartland and inspired by tribal lore and tradition; however, it was launched as an IMFL. Because of policy regulations, the Andhra Pradesh government permitted their venture to manufacture mahua spirit as a non-country liquor.

The entrepreneurs sourced food-grade mahua flowers from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, MP and Odisha, started working directly with tribal groups and paid them a premium price compared to the fluctuating but low market rate. The product, DesmondJi is gaining popularity, but because of strict policy regulations, it is currently only available in Goa and Karnataka and this year in Maharashtra.

"From the very beginning of our Mahua journey, we have been vocal for a policy change to create the 'state heritage liquor' and when the MP government did the same, it seemed our effort is of some use," Desmond said, grinning widely. Their 'forest to bottle' mahua spirit will be introduced abroad soon, with preparations for the same in progress.

But it is not like that mahua is absolutely unknown to the world outside India. Back in 2021, an alcoholic drink under the brand name 'Mah' was introduced in France. Produced in France using flowers sourced from India, the distillation technique indigenous to India was only supplemented by practices experts follow in spirit-making in France, making the mahua drink a global player.

"We strive to build an economy around mahua that will support the Indian Adivasis, attributing the credit where it's due," said Rahul Srivastava, one of the brains behind 'Mah'.

All these initiatives were marked by a very special event recently — National Mahua Conclave — the first of its kind organised by the MP government on September 30, 2023. It took the mahua cause further by encouraging entrepreneurs and connecting tribal flower collectors with prospective buyers.

They diversified into other mahua flower-derived products too, which will also help to rectify the false notion of mahua as a lowly toxic liquor.

However, the positive outcome of such efforts was felt in limited pockets in the tribal belt of central India. For example, in the villages of West Bengal,

Adivasis still carry the baggage of a colonial mindset around mahua. The price of mahua flowers is also falling here, primarily because of the availability of cheaper adulterated liquor.

This has gotten to the point where mahua tree owners are hesitant to keep their *Madhuca indica* trees. Economic distress is breaking the cultural values of not harming this sacred tree. In her seventies, Mongol Hansda, a Santhal from Jharkhand, put it very bluntly, "If the deity can't satiate your hunger, what's the point in worshipping her".

11. Designer Makes Heritage Dolls to Represent Assam's Culture & Tribes

Assam-based Kirat Brahma left his decade-long career as an animation designer and returned home to represent his community through Zankla Studio. It makes eco-friendly soft toys that tell stories deeply rooted in the local culture and traditions of the Bodo community.

Growing up in a small village located between the border of India and Bhutan in Assam's Baksa District, Kirat Brahma's childhood was full of folklore and tribal tales.

"These stories have been a part of my childhood and many others in my community. However, the current generation is missing out on them as they consume so much content online and on television," Kirat tells **The Better India.**

After completing his graduation from the National Institute of Design (NID), Kirat started to work as an animation designer. “I worked in the industry for more than a decade for clients all over the country. I loved experimenting with design and various aspects of animation, but deep down, I always longed for home,” says the 32-year-old.

As Kirat lived in various parts of the country, he became more aware of the discrimination and lack of awareness concerning people from the Northeastern states. By 2020, when the pandemic hit, Kirat had made up his mind to return home and start looking for ideas.

“I wanted to create a product that highlights our culture to the upcoming generations. I also wanted to open a whole new world for people not aware of the Bodo culture. What could be a better way of introducing kids and people to my culture than with soft toys?” he says.

So he started Zankla Studio in 2021 with the aim of showcasing the rich culture of the Bodo Tribe. The studio creates handmade plastic-free soft toys that narrate stories deeply connected to the local culture and traditions of the Bodo community.

“When I was growing up, I did not have toys that represented people like me and others from my community. The markets are flooded with Spiderman, Mickey Mouse and Barbie dolls. So I wanted to create something to spread awareness among people about the existence of Northeastern communities,” he notes.

Each toy created at Zankla Studio carries a narrative native to the tribe or is a representation of a prominent person from the tribe, such as Ada Lowdoom — a Bodo traveller, Bodo Jwhwlao — a traditional Bodo fighter, Gowdang Rani — a Bodo princess.

It comes with a pamphlet containing the story or tale of the fictional or real character that the toy is based on, explains Kirat. “The sole purpose of these toys is to generate conversation among people about the community. A lot of research and thought is put into creating each toy. We have so many lost stories and characters from folklore. We create our toys based on them,” he says.

“For instance, we have Gowdang Rani — the full moon queen who holds a lot of importance for the people of the Bodo community. Whenever there is a war or

some sad occasion, she is believed to visit her people to motivate them. Then there is Gambari Sikla, who made historical contributions, such as fighting against both the Bhutanese and British," he adds.

"The toys look like us and are dressed in traditional clothes, like the authentic Assamese saree, along with traditional accessories, swords etc. The attire can be changed. All the toys are handmade and plastic free. We also make soft toys of animals such as wild buffalo and fish, as they have a great significance to the people of the community," he shares.

Handmade, plastic-free toys that tell stories

Kirat says that all the materials used to create these toys are sourced from local markets.

"The local economy needs a good boost; my community's youth do not have many opportunities. They either leave the village and move to cities or join the Army. I try to employ as many artisans from the community itself to provide them with a work opportunity," he says.

He says they have sold around 100 toys so far. Each toy is usually priced anywhere between Rs 800 to Rs 3,000 depending on the work involved. They are also working on adding more categories. "The people receive our toys with a lot of love," he remarks.

He further shares that the real test of the toys came when he received an order from a 90-year-old woman from Mumbai. "It was her 90th birthday and she wanted to gift something to her friends. She had read about me and was curious to see the products. I was delighted as a woman sitting in some other part of the country was showing interest in my product," he says.

"I have been to the area and knew a bit about the women, the attires, and their culture. While I was looking for some ideas for the gifts I found Zankla Studio and was very impressed. I ordered 50 small birds for my guests and a pair of dolls for my niece's daughter. The quality of the products is great, but what makes them special is the message behind them. The dolls were wearing sarees and their traditional *gamochas* (traditional Assamese clothing) which made them a great hit," says Neela D'Souza.

Talking about the toys, Vibha Kamat, Neela's daughter-in-law says, "The toys really open up a whole new world for the children. My mother-in-law's niece's

daughter had a lot of questions about why the doll was dressed a certain way, or where she is from. This introduced her to a whole new tribe and community that resides on the other side of the country."

As for future plans, Kirat says, "I wish to hire more artisans, hence provide more employment opportunities to the people of my tribe. To me, this is more than just a business; it is my chance to add value to my community and showcase it to the world."