



WALK WITH ME

Samvaad Adivasi Leadership Programme, 2017

A Tata Steel Initiative



Samvaad - A Tribal Cor
Organised by Tata Steel

In the beginning there was a river.
The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world.
And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.

~ Writer Ben Okri ~

Deepa Adhikari

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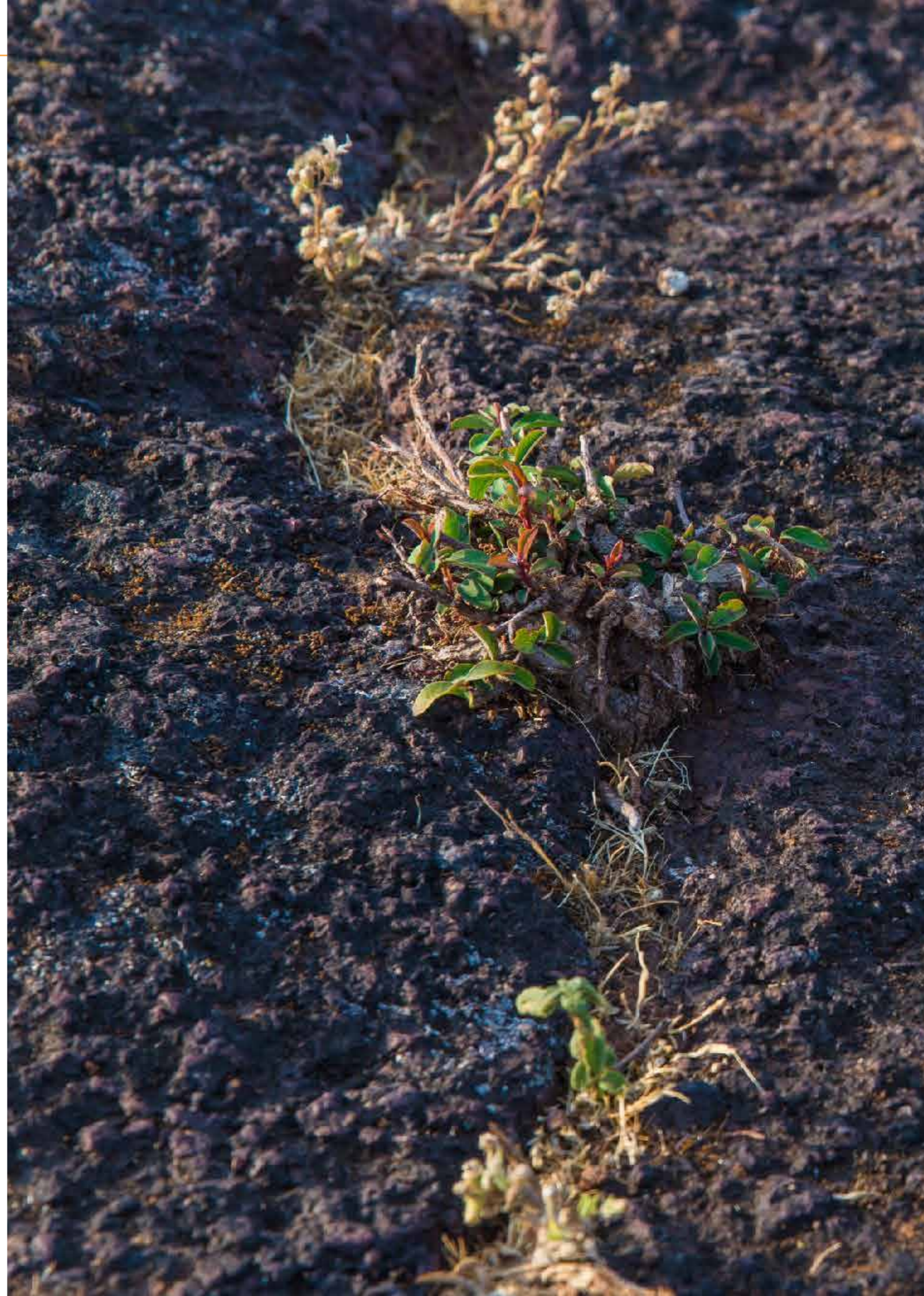
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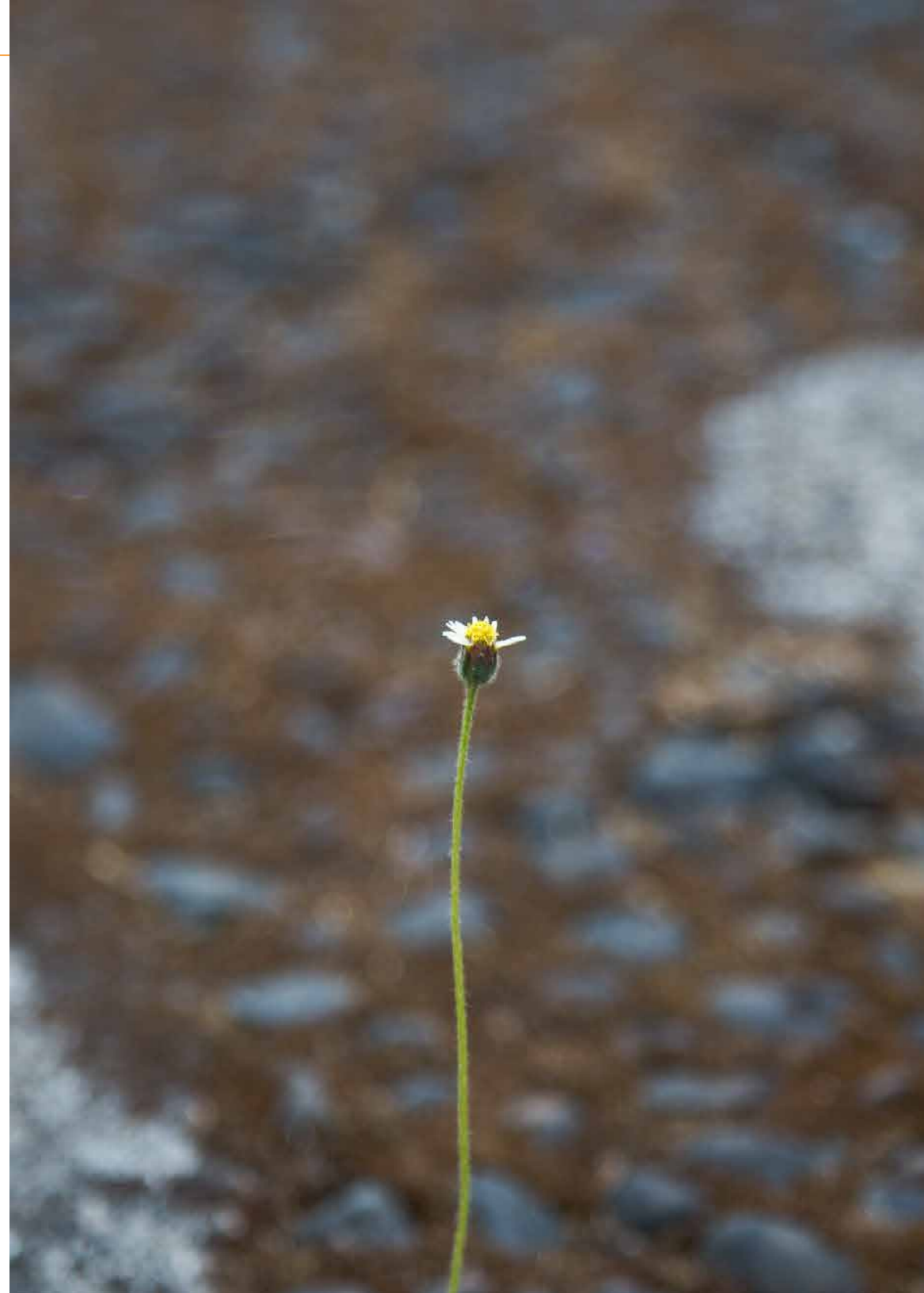
A Madua Sprout on the Grave

On a little mound of mud in the village
Has emerged a tiny madua sprout.
Not a mere mound it is, but a grave,
In which lies the dead remains
Of Sugna, perished of hunger and starvation.
Having soaked in the life-giving dew
That madua seed cringing in fear hitherto
Has now emerged from hiding.

His children squirm about
Watching seedlings of paddy sprout
On the long unlit earthen stove
In the cow dung smeared courtyard.
And his widow, famished and distraught,
Stares at the blackened bottom of the rice pot
Kept upturned, empty, unfed,
As if by fire of hunger charred.

Sugna's wife and children
Will this time not starve to death.
They will take their own lives instead.
For dying of hunger, they know too well,
Stirs up no storms, does not sell.
A suicide, on the other hand,
Guarantees their corpses will make headlines,
And probes into the whys and wherefores
Will lead them to many more doors
With stoves unlit and ovens gone cold.

~ Jacinta Kerketta (Translated from Hindi)



Gaon chhodab nahi
 Jangal chhodab nahi
 Maay maati chhodab nahi
 Ladayi chhodab nahi

~ Oriya poet and activist Bhagban Majhi
 (Translated from Sadri language)

An iconic song of activism, it laments the encroachment of the waters, lands and forests of adivasi identity, and the unflinching struggle to reclaim indigenous rights.

India's first people are scattered among 705 geographic and linguistic communities. 10.43 crores in numbers, they comprise about 8.6% of our population. For such a large number of people, once living in a self-sufficient system of life and culture, dating back thousands of years, consider the references today: Poor. Marginalised. Backward. Underrepresented in politics. Displaced by industries. Threatened by insurgency. Developmentally disempowered by governmental negligence.

Given the remoteness of their habitats, adivasis are largely cut off from communications technology. They are also shy and private people. There are numerous adivasi groups, each with a leader. Since they are at a distance from the mainstream, they are unable to forge a nationwide adivasi network. This robs them of robust, influential voices to fight for common causes.

The disempowerment also comes from within. Emotionally tethered to their increasingly financially unviable farmlands, they are not able to take advantage of the kinds of migration that enable. They also either do not have access to or do not want to go to mainstream educational institutions.

Since 2014, under Samvaad, a tremendous process of introspection has begun. Samvaad is an annual all-India adivasi congress facilitated by Tata Steel. It has created a platform for the fragmented indigenous leadership to deliberate on common issues:

- How can we fight for geographical rights sans instincts of violence and separatism?
- How can we create powerful political, social and entrepreneurial voices that can represent us effectively?
- How can we forge a pan-Indian adivasi identity?
- How can we promote artists to counter our cultural alienation?
- How can we better prepare our students to ease into university campuses outside our region?

Taking these questions as its core focus, the 2017 Adivasi Leadership Programme, a crucial initiative of Samvaad, brought together 93 promising candidates from 55 adivasi groups (including 5 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) for a customised workshop on self-evaluation, community solutions and leadership.

The programme was implemented by the Initiatives of Change or IofC. It is a worldwide movement comprising of people, of diverse cultures and backgrounds, who are committed to the transformation of society through changes in human motives and behaviour, starting with their own. Eminent people flew down to address the sessions:

- Historian, biographer and thinker **Mr. Rajmohan Gandhi**,
- Renowned Naga social activist and recipient of the North East India Peace Awards (2016) **Mr. Niketu Iralu**,
- Adivasi Activist **Dr. Sunil Kaul**. He is the founder of The Ant, an NGO based in Rowmari in Lower Assam. It works directly for village development in Chirang District of Bodoland in Lower Assam. It also works with other NGOs to build up the voluntary sector in the North-East,
- **Mr. Promod Bodo**, the progressive president of the All Bodo Students' Union,
- and **Dr. Ramaswami Balasubramaniam**, a development scholar, author, activist and public policy advocate, known for his pioneering work with the adivasis of Saragur in Karnataka.

The programme has discovered keen, young minds, with holistic and strategic vision for adivasi India. The voices featured here are that of both thought leaders and participants, a collective of First Among Equals.



THE DISPLACEMENT OF IDENTITY

THE DAY OF THE MUNDA

Thursday, December 19, 1946

The Constituent Assembly of India met in the Constitution Hall, New Delhi, at 11 am
The Honourable Dr. Rajendra Prasad in the Chair

The Constituent Assembly was debating and deliberating on the draft of the new Constitution for independent India. The stalwarts — Pandit Jawarhalal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and Sarojini Naidu — were present.

Then Jaipal Singh Munda rose to speak. A 43-year-old adivasi from present-day Jharkhand, he had studied in the Oxford University, was a politician, a writer and a hockey player with international winnings to his name. That might be. But before this day, nobody really knew him. If he was a compelling speaker, I will allow you to be the judge.

“I rise to speak on behalf of millions of unknown hordes, yet very important, of unrecognised warriors of freedom, the original people of India who have variously been known as backward tribes, primitive tribes, criminal tribes and everything else. Sir, I am proud to be a jungli, that is the name by which we are known in my part of the country...

“As a jungli, as an adivasi, I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my common sense tells me that every one of us should march in that road to freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated, it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated, neglected for the last 6,000 years. The history of the Indus Valley civilisation, a child of which I am, shows quite clearly that it is the newcomers — most of you here are intruders as far as I am concerned — it is the newcomers who have driven away my people from the Indus Valley to the jungle. The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder, and yet I take Pandit Jawarhalal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected. There is no question of caste in my society. We are all equal. Have we not been casually treated by the Cabinet Mission, more than 30 million people completely ignored? It is only a matter of political window-dressing that today we find six tribal members in this Constituent Assembly. How is it? What has the Indian National Congress done for our fair representation?”

Jaipal Singh was asking for a separate homeland for all adivasis in Central India, convinced that if they don't consolidate forces, their exploitation would continue.

I HAD A DREAM

A recall of an Independence-era conversation by one of the eminent intellectuals of our time gives us a glimpse into what history did next.

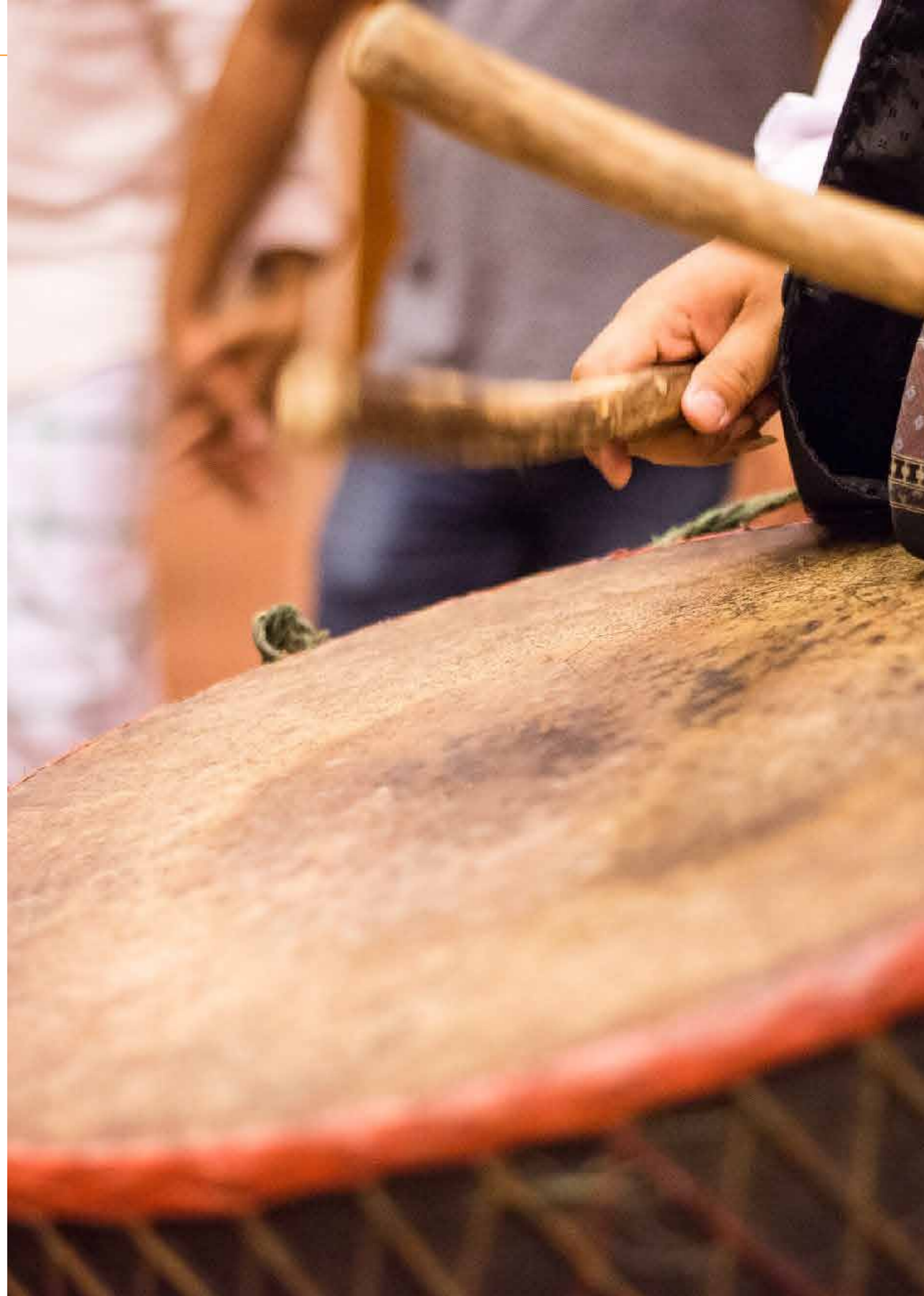
(Excerpts from *The Tribal World and Imagination of the Future* by Shiv Vishvanathan, VERRIER ELWIN Lecture, 2006)

Nehru and Sardar were clear. The adivasis were not razakars. Their culture was different... Their world and their arguments were an appeal to a different imagination. The adivasis, the leaders felt, had to be talked with. Despite the violence the adivasi leaders held their peace. They wanted their world along our world. They wanted to be separate, equal and reciprocal.

Nehru summoned Jaipal Singh, Ram Dayal Munda, Dr. Raphael Horo and other leaders to Delhi.

The meeting with the Chhotanagpur Five was held in Teen Murti Bhavan. The meeting was attended by Sarojini Naidu, Abul Kalam Azad, Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, Nehru and Patel.

The Chhotanagpur Five argued that Indian democracy would always have to be fluid or different. It was not a stock of collectivities but a flow of people. In India, citizenship belongs not just to a domesticated middle class, but to its millions of nomads, its pastoral groups and its adivasis, who were not part of the constituent assembly and had probably never heard of it. Their way of life, their taxonomies defied the nation-state. India could only be India if yesterday's secessionist was today's citizen. It was a cycle of life, lifestyle, and livelihood that transcended the current ideas of politics. Modern politics hovers between taxonomy and taxidermy.



Patel turned to Jaipal Singh and said, "Constitutionally what you are suggesting is not possible." Patel insisted, "Our preamble is non-negotiable. Our borders are non-negotiable. This is not a seminar or a haat. It is about our country you are talking about."

Singh nodded sadly, realising that when push came to shove the "adivasis were not yet Indians. Only potential Indians, problematic Indians, primitive Indians, but never Indians per se. India, like Brahminism, needs twice-borns not the twice-aborted."

Then Jaipal Singh began one of his longer speeches. He looked only at Nehru and Patel. He said, "There is little you are offering us. The Constitution is yours. The borders are yours. The sovereignty is yours. The flag is yours. What is ours? What is that is both adivasi and Indian in the Constitution? What is the shared legacy, the common weave? You have defined rights, the isms, the industry, the science, let something be ours." It was then that Nehru proposed that maybe Singh could define the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP). Singh added wryly, "Ah the non-justiciable part." Nehru added, "It is a vision of the future." Munda said he liked the irony, "Your past as your future, our anthropology now as your science fiction." Over the next two days, the adivasis wrote or itemised the dreams of the future into the DPSP.

The debates around the DPSP became one of the most vibrant dialogues about the future of India. What struck him most was that adivasis as an interest group did not begin with their sense of victimhood, of wrongs to be righted, but of democracy as a fundamental question...

Both Nehru and Sardar were too preoccupied with the Partition. Sardar had become more Bismarckian than ever, refusing any negotiation on the nation-state, "We need a copy book nation. If I allow you the freedom to experiment, the whole of the North-East would go on fire." Nehru struck a different chord echoing the other half of Sardar's mind.

He said, "The Partition has been too traumatic. Over one million people dead and 16 million people displaced. We need time to heal," he begged. The rest sympathised but Dr. Raphael Horo blurted, "One day you will create more refugees from your dam projects. The Damodar Valley Corporation will be an epidemic." But there was a sense of defeat on both sides. Both realised they had been upstaged by history with a capital H.

The meeting broke down soon after. Nehru and Sardar had joined the costume ball of the state. Governance has its dramas which are demanding. Jaipal Singh and Ram Dayal Munda returned to wait as Nehru advised. But the opportunity never came. Sometimes tragedy is a drama whose time never comes. All it leaves is the salty-stale-bitter taste of irony of a forgotten people.

THE INTERIM

(Excerpts from *Adivasis in the Indian Republic* by Ashok Celly, *Mainstream Weekly*, October 30, 2016)

Perhaps the greatest sin that independent India's ruling class committed was that it relentlessly engaged in the most brutal exploitation of adivasis. It has done to the adivasis what the White Americans did to the Red Indians. It robbed them of their land and national resources and destroyed their cultural identity. All in the name of development. What Jaipal Singh said way back in 1946 in the Constituent Assembly holds true of 70 years of post-independence India as well.

While the national movement led by Mahatma Gandhi found some space for women and the Dalits, it completely ignored the adivasi segment of India's population. Even the young radicals, like Subhash Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru, did not empathise with them. In a word, the adivasis did not form part of the national consciousness.

Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India entered a phase of development after independence with a lot of hope. Nehru believed India's salvation lay in modernisation, that is, building massive steel plants and big river dams. There is no doubt Nehru succeeded in building a modern India of sorts creating in the process a middle class of prosperous businessmen and powerful bureaucrats. But his development plans did not benefit the poor, certainly not the adivasis.

In fact it would not be incorrect to say that the Nehruvian project resulted in their impoverishment, for the big dams uprooted them from their environment with promises of compensation which seldom materialised or were too paltry. They were forced to join the mass of industrial proletariat — economically insecure and culturally alienated.



According to one estimate, at the national level 45.86 per cent of all adivasis live below the poverty line. Incidentally the official Indian poverty line is nothing more than a starvation line which means that almost half of India's original inhabitants go to bed at night starving.

In fact, the sources of the Maoist movement are largely a consequence of the callous neglect and brutal exploitation of the adivasis. The discontent of the adivasis provided a fertile ground for the growth of the Maoist movement in areas like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. The influence and power of the Maoists is a measure of the colossal failure of the state in fulfilling the needs and aspirations of the most oppressed segment of the population.

We hear a lot about 'vikas' these days... The millions of Eklavyas have been victims of diabolic treachery and brutal oppression for thousands of years. Therefore, at this critical juncture in India's history, we need not 'sab ka vikas' but 'sab se pehle sarvahara ka vikas'. The last man first. Let the last man be at the centre of our development plans, at least for some years. This is how the ruling class of this land could atone for its sins and redeem itself in some measure.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

(Excerpts from *Land, Development and Democracy* by Mihir Shah, *The Hindu*, April 25, 2015)

Official estimates place the number of people displaced due to development projects since Independence at 60 million, less than a third of whom have been properly resettled. Most of the displaced are the assetless rural poor, marginal farmers, poor fisherfolk and quarry workers. Around 40 per cent of them are adivasis and 20 per cent Dalits. Official statistics testify that on all indicators of development, Dalits and adivasis have been the worst-off groups. Already at the bottom of the development pyramid, being deprived of their land and livelihoods has completely pauperised them, forcing many to move and live in subhuman conditions in our metros.

It is in this backdrop that we need to understand the heightened sensitivities and palpable anger over forcible land acquisitions. Given that 90 per cent of our coal, more than 50 per cent of most minerals and prospective dam sites are mainly in adivasi regions, there has been, and is likely to be, continuing tension over issues of land acquisition. Through these tensions, not only has a question mark been placed over our development strategy, the delicate fabric of Indian democracy has become terribly frayed at the edges. In the remote adivasi heartlands of India, people feel such a deep and abiding sense of hurt, alienation and cynicism that they have allowed themselves to be helplessly drawn into a terrible vortex of violence and counter-violence, even when they know in their heart of hearts that it will lead to their own destruction.

I do not dispute the fact that there can be many situations where land is needed for a development project that could actually benefit those whose lands are being acquired. What could be the possible harm in seeking the prior, informed consent of these people, after making the effort of explaining to them how they would stand to benefit? There are those who argue that farmers would be better off giving up farming. Indeed, they say farmers do not want to farm any more. Why would these farmers conceivably say no if we were to propose more attractive and tangible alternative options to them in return for their land? Is it not for farmers to assess whether the project will actually be of benefit to them and whether the recompense offered to them is a fair bargain? And allow them to be parties in working out what could be regarded as a fair deal for all?

When we look back at the history of land acquisition in India, we find it riddled with instances of far too much land being acquired and not being put to use. Just one look at the huge amounts of unused land in possession of many of our universities today would make you see the point. And as a recent study by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reveals, of the over 60,000 hectares of land acquired for Special Economic Zones (SEZs), from 2006 to 2013, around 53 per cent has not been put to any use. Just because it is possible to bully uninformed village people, we continued to do so.

If we want to acquire the land of farmers to serve larger goals, surely the projects in which they are embodied must not be of the kinds that repeat the mistakes of the past. The people of this country, who are being asked to make sacrifices for the larger national good, must know and be convinced that what they give up will indeed serve a meaningful "public purpose" and not involve the injustices and malpractices of the past.



THE ASIA PLATEAU EXPERIENCE

The Initiatives of Change (IofC) International is a global network committed to building integrity and trust across the world's divides. It comprises people of diverse cultures, nations, beliefs and backgrounds who are committed to transforming society through change in individuals and relationships, starting with their own lives.

Moments of personal transformation often mark a new direction in a person's life. And personal change can lead to change in situations. Whenever anyone, prompted by compassion and conscience, faces the reality about themselves and takes honest steps towards change, that action communicates to others. It inspires a growth in the human spirit that in turn kindles initiatives of change in families, communities and beyond. This integrity could be the engine which drives social transformation in the 21st century – a growing momentum of people who become agents of change and reconciliation.

Headquartered in Caux (Switzerland), IofC is a Non-Governmental Organisation in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and has Participatory Status at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

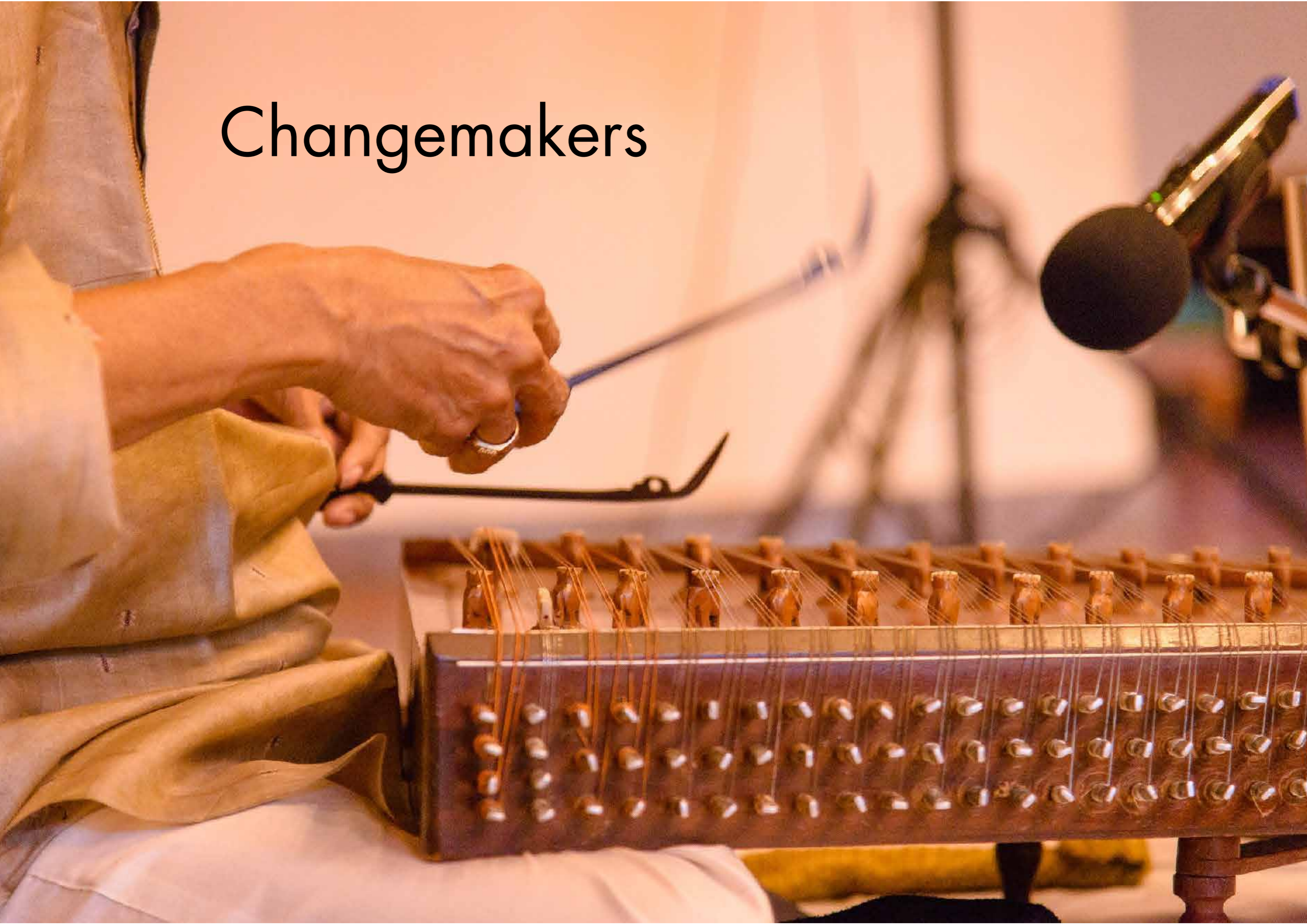
In India, Asia Plateau is the introspection and dialogue centre. It is located in the Western hills of Maharashtra at Panchgani, 100 km from Pune. IofC is a way of life as well as a membership organisation. Formal structures have been kept to a minimum.

The Adivasi Leadership Programme is committed to develop leaders, who would not only guide and mobilise their communities, but do so in an ethical and objective manner, in keeping with the key commitment of the IofC network.

The adivasis find IofC's quiet environs, the almost ascetic yet informal life and the emotional candidness of its people from various parts of the globe nourishing. They are able to open up, share, engage in dialogue and immerse in evaluation.



Changemakers



DR. R. BALASUBRAMANIAM

FOUNDER, SWAMI VIVEKANANDA YOUTH MOVEMENT
FOUNDER & PRESIDENT, GRASSROOTS RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY MOVEMENT (GRAAM)

India has 10.43 crore adivasis as per the 2011 census. They vary in strength in different states, from a few hundreds to several lakhs. Their largest concentrations are in Central India and the North-East. Their essential characteristics first laid down by the Lokur Committee are • Indications of primitive traits • Distinctive culture • Shyness of contact • Geographical isolation • and Economic backwardness.

Out of a total of 705 adivasi communities, 75 are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), who still use pre-agricultural technology and are a stagnant or declining population.

To give focussed attention to the social and economic development of this indigenous population, the Government of India set up an exclusive Ministry of Tribal Affairs in the year 1999. In the current financial year the ministry has planned to spend around Rs. 5,300 crores. A lot of money is also allocated to the cause by NGOs and Corporate Social Responsibility programmes.

Why then does the development of adivasis lag so much?

Because, paradoxically, most programmes are designed by non-adivasis. They decide what the adivasi developmental terrain should look like. Many of these so-called experts are totally disconnected from the ground realities. Even if they are genuinely concerned for adivasi welfare and willing to bring in enormous resources, can they truly articulate the complex struggles of adivasi India?

Having made many similar mistakes, working with and for the adivasis, I now appreciate the importance of engaging with them even before considering what would be the kind of intervention and how one should undertake it.

Our adivasis are at a crossroad, neither able to move away from traditional economies nor integrate with the contemporary markets. Neither can they let go of the past nor embrace the present. Programmes that are thrust on them force them to accept a lifestyle that is unsustainable – socially, economically and culturally. They are vulnerable to exploitation by mainstream forces who take advantage of the poverty that surrounds them.

What then is a successful developmental template for adivasis?

It can be arrived at only if the leaders driving the development programmes are adivasis themselves. Educated adivasi youth, with an understanding of the factors that have forced their communities to integrate with the mainstream, are best placed to be a part of the solutions framework.

However, to gain legitimacy, they need a broader understanding of the subject, leadership skills and assertion. The Tata Steel Adivasi Leadership Programme, conducted in association with the Initiatives of Change, is doing exactly that. A first-of-its-kind CSR project, it is a powerful force that may revolutionise the developmental framework for adivasis in the years to come.

A conversation between various adivasi communities, moderated and enriched by teachers and prominent personalities, this is a forum where participants learn about the issues of each other's communities, like management of forest resources, hijacking of reservations by external forces, disappearing traditional systems, healthcare voids and emerging solutions and challenges of education. They also deliberate on overarching common issues, such as acquisition of adivasi habitats by the government and the industries, and forcible resettlement and rehabilitation.

The true impact of this programme will be felt, possibly a decade later, when, hopefully, a cohort of nearly 1,000 young adivasis will rise, both trained in leadership and networked with adivasi communities across the country. It will be a honeycomb of likeminded, compassionate, aware and empowered men and women, who would actively conceive and implement the adivasi developmental agendas. They will be a mature, pragmatic and positive generation, who will nurture their communities and create a progressive and equitable adivasi world.

Tata Steel and IofC are ushering in this paradigm shift, which is both futuristic and realistic. The young leaders that they are creating will have the ability to negotiate with the government, NGOs and other development partners, who they will be able to co-opt. Possibly, they will also be examples of an unbiased sustainable development model that all of us are searching for. In this model could lie the future of the world itself.



NIKETU IRALU

RENOWNED NAGA LEADER, GANDHIAN, SOCIAL AND PEACE ACTIVIST
AWARDEE, NORTH EAST INDIA PEACE AWARDS (2016)

Son: Why do they treat us like this?

Mother: No one knows why. We do not understand them, and they do not try to understand us. But every tree has its roots deep down in the ground. Even their actions must have roots. I want you to go to school, so that you can dig out the roots. Do not hesitate to uproot their tree and drink their wisdom.

~ Excerpt from *The Unexpected Hawk* by Papua New Guinea Historian John Dademo Waiko

Albert Maori Kiki, the celebrated Papua New Guinea politician, was one of the founders of the Pangu Party. It fought for home rule, which led to the eventual emancipation of the country. On September 15, 1975, Papua New Guinea became an independent state after 70 years under Australian rule.

Why am I telling you this?

Kiki was born into the stone-age life of a semi-nomadic tribe. It is part of the primary Melanesian race of the country, people with dark skins and blonde hair, who live on 600 small islands the country is made of.

Kiki attended a missionary primary school and later, against all adversities, went on to earn a post-graduation degree. Then he entered public life. During the years of political struggle that followed, he wrote *Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime*. This remarkable book is the first autobiography, in fact the first important book, ever to come out of Papua New Guinea.

As Kiki narrates how in his own lifetime he had to span thousands of years of human development, he personifies his country. Other countries have had a learning curve. They have had the time to make mistakes and amends. Papua New Guinea had to fall in step with the world immediately after formation. It had no time to imbibe or experiment.

Following Independence, the newly-born country had to send a representative to the United Nations. The emissary was expected to be a graduate. Kiki was, a rare one at that. He had never flown before. He went to New York, and found himself rubbing shoulders with the who's who of the world.

A few years later, the Queen chose him for knighthood because his country is part of the British Commonwealth. He became Sir Albert Maori Kiki.

When I read the book, I almost cried. I said to myself, this is the crisis of my people too. We have to catch up to so much. We have to span Ten Thousand Years in our lifetime.

We don't know how to build on our indigenous knowledge to come up to speed. The world is bombarding our thoughts and spirit. The solution is not to get drunk and be oblivious. We have to be realistic to survive.

Coming from a background of long deprivation, we can easily go wrong. We need young leaders with the right intent. We must encourage youth who show ability, capacity and talent, who are full of character and truthfulness we can depend on. They can reach out to mainstream programmes and create healthy and fruitful dialogues.

Our existing leaders don't assume that responsibility. They concern themselves only with their clan or village. Some become powerful and corrupt and stop engaging altogether.

Nagas might be an ancient race, but a very young society. We came into contact with the world only when the British wanted to make us a part of Assam. This was as recently as the beginning of the 19th century. We are trying to respond to so many things in a short span of time.

We may be adivasis, but we are also a part of the human ecosystem, and a very essential one at that. We have a role to play in the broad canvas. If we don't, we will find ourselves deleted from the larger context. We can't say we will only fight for our aspirations and not think of anybody else. Violence may destroy us. We must trust that dialogues and conversations will lead us to a solution.

The lofC programme says be the change you want to see. Take ownership. Be responsible. Keep the process clean.



It has worked for the Bodos. Their youth movement has given up violence and has found new, reconciliatory energy. They are keeping the process pure and waiting for a non-violent outcome. The government may think they are too small a population to bother with peace talks. The government may think that if it ignores them, they will give up and become violent and then they can be shot down. The Bodos have decided to not allow that to happen. The government shall be forced to listen.

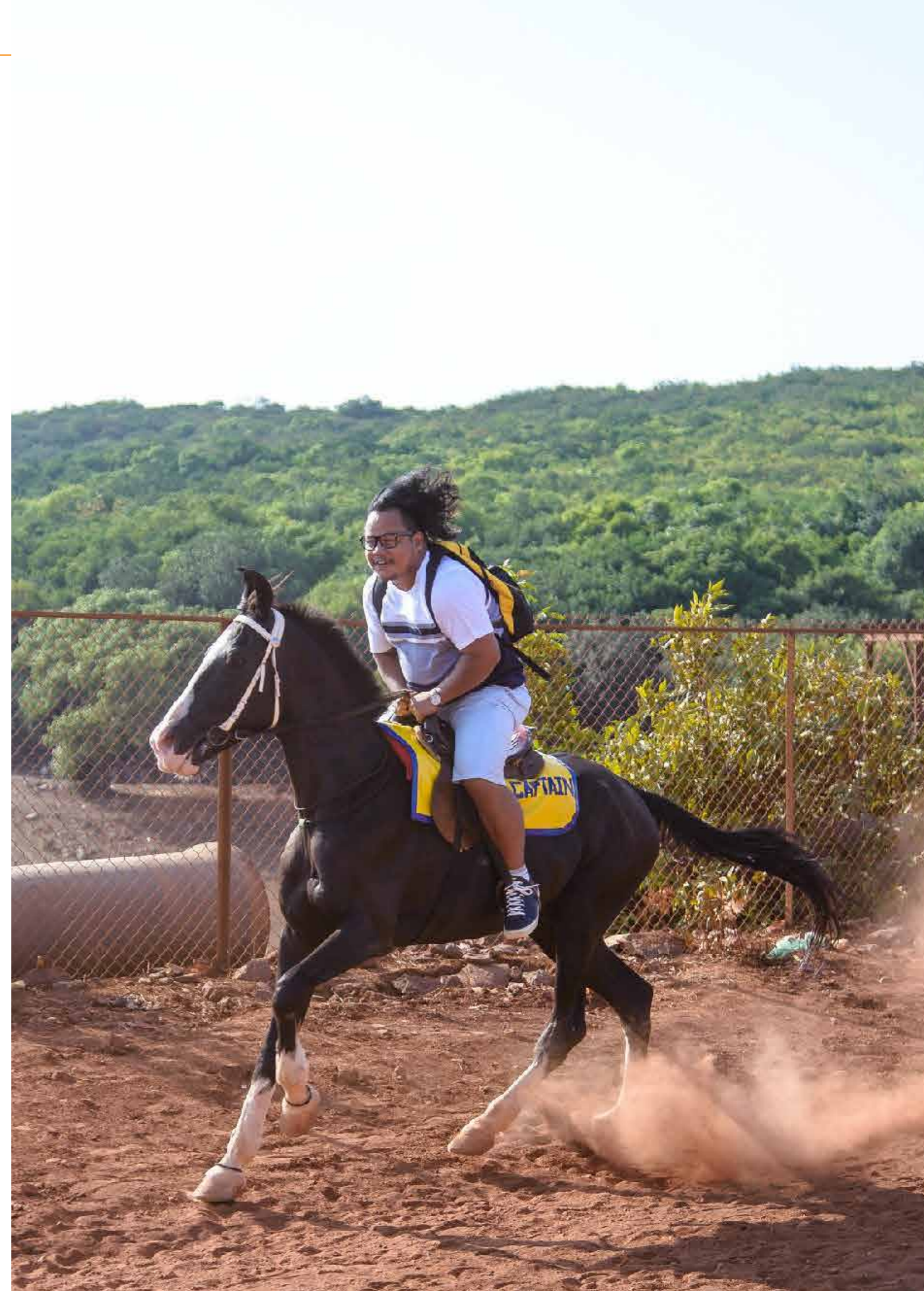
Look at the Meitei of Manipur. They have a lot more exposure. Nagaland to Manipur is a very short distance, but it is amazing to see what they have achieved compared to us. By the time we came out to the world, Manipuri kings and their armies had invaded Burma. They had gone as far as Mandalay and Rangoon.

The Manipuris and Bodos have experience and resilience. The typical Naga response to life is to hit and then not know what to do. Nagas follow fashion trends. They walk in high-heeled shoes on bad village roads. Many feel that house rentals bring in good money, so there's no point in pursuing higher education or finding a job. They would rather inherit their fathers' properties, partially rent them out and drink all day. Meiteis, on the other hand, know that they have to keep pace with the wider world. So they produce sportsmen of the highest standards.

We eat dogs. If someone criticises us for it, just say, 'Yes, we do. Don't you? You may also learn to like it.' Leave it at that, instead of turning belligerent. People come from different perspectives. Listen. They might be trying to express something fundamental to them. Thank them for their honesty.

We look different. If someone calls us Chinese, you can say, 'I am from Kohima. I am an Indian. We look like this and we can't help it.' Or you can say, 'That's a great compliment. You look wonderful too. You look like a Pakistani.' The hurt you feel and the argument you wish to convey can be expressed without raised voices and fists.

We must know ourselves. Otherwise, no one will bother to know us. We have to examine ourselves and accept what we discover. Be honest. We may find that we don't amount to much, despite our rich history and culture and struggles. At least, we are not less than this. That is a good way to begin.



SUNIL KAUL

FOUNDER, CEO AND MANAGING TRUSTEE, the ant (THE ACTION NORTHEAST TRUST)

"I grew up in the North-East. My father worked with All India Radio in Imphal, Manipur. In those days, government jobs did not pay much. I used to regularly wear hand-me-downs from my relatives, father's colleagues and their older kids. I had never seen luxury. Yet, I knew in my heart that we were privileged compared to most Indians."

"These days everyone has a car. In those days, even the most senior government officers did not have one. We led a simple life. But do not think I never wanted to be dishonest. While growing up, I tried quite often but it always backfired. If I am not dishonest today, it is also because my experiments with dishonesty never worked."

Sunil joined the prestigious Armed Force Medical College in Pune in 1979, his decision possibly influenced by Jayprakash Narayan and his movement against corruption, triggered by the Indira Gandhi-government-enforced Emergency of 1975 that threatened our Constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties.

Sunil believed he would find the essence of patriotism and non-corrupt systems in the Army. Well, many young dreams are routinely destroyed at the altar of reality, the good doctor's notwithstanding.

In 1985, he was deputed to Arunachal Pradesh, his first field posting, where he came face to face with rural reality. The solitude of the high mountains also gave him the opportunity to look at his career in the forces and assess whether it matches his larger vision. He found a dissonance. "I had lived in the North-East in my childhood, hence the region was not new to me. It is also true that before Arunachal, I had never lived in a village. I understood the difference between India and Bharat. Bharat is a colony of India.

"I had to walk a lot during my duties there, sometimes up to 40 kilometers a day close to the border. No education or health facilities were available in large parts. I wondered what I was doing in the Army with people who had little or no illnesses. Besides, I grew close to the ideology of ahimsa and found myself at odds with violence. The urge to quit started there, and fructified when I was posted at the Rajasthan border, where, in my free time, I had begun to teach children and treat poor people. Consequently, after completing five years, which I felt was necessary to pay off my debt to the nation for having taught me medicine, I put in my resignation in 1989, but it was repeatedly denied."

"In 1991, I was posted in Kashmir. Doctors had to go into the battlefield with soldiers. I must have seen and heard thousands of gunshots. I have treated bullet injuries only seconds old. The militancy in Kashmir was at its peak.

"In a meeting, a brigadier said that the Sunnis, and not the Shias, have instigated most of the trouble, and if we manage to exploit the gap between the two communities, we would be able to source information faster. I was disgusted by the idea and I stood up. My heart was pounding like a drum in my chest. In an active battlefield like Kashmir, you can be shot after a summary court-martial if you challenge your leadership. Anyway, I told the leader that this is what the British did to our nation, and if we do the same in Kashmir, our children will bear the load of our errors."

1990 onwards, during his vacations, Sunil started volunteering with a rural NGO in Rajasthan. By 1994, he was allowed to resign his commission in the Army and joined the NGO full-time, focusing on health. But deep down, he wanted to be back in the North-East.

"I had learned how one could partner with NGOs and raise funds for a cause. In 1996, I went back with a senior, like-minded friend and began to work with communities around the world's largest river island, Majuli. The separatist militia group ULFA did not understand our work and grew suspicious of us. They felt we had been sent by the Home Ministry or the Army and kidnapped my friend, holding him to ransom. If we wanted him free, we were told that we would have to leave the area. We left."

"Few days later we found out that they had killed my friend on the day after his abduction. Some of us felt cheated and wanted to return. But none of the NGOs wanted us; they did not want to upset the ULFA. I had to prove to myself that my faith in ahimsa was not shaken and that I wasn't scared of violence. I spent the next year in London studying for a master's degree in Public Health. I even joined the BBC as a translator announcer to earn some money to be able to go back and start again on my own!"



In 1999-2000, he came back with an ex-colleague Jennifer Liang, who he married later. In 2000, with the support of Ravindranath Upadhyay, they started *the ant* (The Action Northeast Trust).

the ant, based in Chirang District in Lower Assam, works for the development of 250 villages that are violence-torn for decades, besides training other NGOs all over the North-East on various issues from time to time.

"I think the problem arises when we use violence as a tool to solve issues. When violence enters the picture, truth becomes the first casualty. You cannot tell who is wrong and who is right. I think we need to concentrate on what is wrong rather than who is wrong."

The organisation's ongoing projects include educational and sports-for-development interventions, relief and rehabilitation for the 2012 and 2014 riot-affected, financial and social skill development for women and girls, peace and justice building, physical and mental health interventions, area development, and a not-for-profit enterprise to promote traditional Bodo weaves. It employs over one hundred once-disempowered women.

"It's good when you can help people with employment opportunities, help them with medicines. But it's great when you can re-energise people, help them come out of their shell and inspire them to do great things."

Apart from its own direct village development work, *the ant* has set itself a mandate of helping build up a vibrant voluntary sector in the North-East, under project IDeA (The Institute of Development Action).

"I take my inspiration from ants. To quote the National Geographic Magazine, 'Ants have been called one of the most successful organisms on Earth. Their numbers boggle the mind. In terms of biomass (the amount of living matter), ants make up at least 15 per cent of the terrestrial animal biomass. In tropical areas, such as the Amazon, this number increases to 25 per cent or more.' We humans can carry only one third of our body weight. Ants can carry up to fifty times their body weight. An ant never gives up; it manages to find a solution in the face of the toughest challenges. It works collectively, invariably to clean the mess that has been created by others. Its attitude inspires us."



PROMOD BODO

PRESIDENT, ALL BODO STUDENTS' UNION

ON IDENTITY

The concept is intricate. Nature has given everyone and everything an identity. Even a tree has one. It's different in form and natural attributes. That is how, at a primal level, identity is formed. Human identity, much like flora and fauna, is multilayered. There are broader definitions in terms of countries. Within a country, then there are geographic and ethnic categories. And so on. The identity that we derive from religion, politics, geography, race and ethnicity is secondary. At some point, we became Hindus and Muslims, aboriginals and foreigners, black and white. Over time, we forgot our source. We are all products of cell division. We created layers upon layers, and arrived at identity crisis.

A BODO BEYOND BODOLAND

The limited understanding of other languages among Bodos is a big barrier. So is our lack of knowledge and information. We consider our habitats our universe. We do not understand the world beyond, nor do we feel the need. So, when a Bodo travels to Delhi for the first time, he or she might not know that food might be more expensive. Why Delhi! Let's take nearby Guwahati, which has a zoo. Go to a Bodo village and ask if they have seen it. Out of 5,000 people, only about ten or fifteen will say yes. We are not curious about the world. We don't have good schools and institutions. The ones we have do not impart the same quality of education as urban schools. Our students learn only from textbooks. Journals and newspapers don't reach us. Television transmissions don't work properly. Nor does the Internet. We live in a strange isolation.

SELF-DETERMINATION

Say, I am demanding a separate Bodoland. The question to ask myself would be: What will I do with Bodoland? In Bodoland, there live other people too. Even among Bodos, there are differences. Truth is, if the Central Government does not grant us a separate state, instead runs the systems flawlessly, it would be a fantastic resolution. The states in the North-East do not require food. Our nature is rich. So is our culture. What we need is better education and healthcare, effective communications and technology. We are good people. We are honest people. Yet, because of systemic deprivation, if our brothers join the insurgents, whose fault is it? The Bodos have accepted me as the leader. It is my responsibility to help them access development. We are victims of acute corruption. Money allocated for our development disappears in the pockets of leaders. When the Bodoland Territorial Council was formed in 2003, at the helm were leaders who were former militants. Before coming to power, they had led armed protests against the government, accusing it of sidelining Bodos. After assuming power, they forgot our struggle. They stole public money to build big bungalows for themselves.

THE MOVEMENT

When I joined the movement in 2010 in a leadership role, as the President of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), I knew I could not bring change alone. I said that we would need to multiply leadership and mobilise ourselves on a non-violent path. We gather people in hundreds and urge them not to resort to violence. If you want to be a part of the movement, we say, you must pledge: If I do it, I will do it right. If I don't do it, at least I won't do it wrong.' It works. Bodos have not resorted to violence in the last six years.

IOFC

Our problem is not violence right now, but corruption, which is, in essence, moral corruption. Every year, our youngsters graduate from the universities or become IAS officers. They have no moral compass. They are corrupt right from the start. Hence, IOFC should reach out to our young people and politicians. People in power will not come to IOFC. We have to target the ones in the Opposition right now. When they come to power in five years, the learnings would have taken effect. IOFC can help us root out political and administrative corruption, which is eating us hollow.





New voices



USHABEN VASAVA (VASAVA BHIL)

AGE: 36 | RESIDENCE: PACHPIPRI VILLAGE, NARMADA DISTRICT, GUJARAT
EDUCATION: SCHOOL PASS | PROFESSION: AGRO ENTREPRENEUR

Mine has been such a long journey. That timid, under-confident, scared housewife, with no understanding of the world, is gone. I am a community leader, an activist, and an adivasi business voice of some reckoning.

Our women lived in the shadows. They were not allowed to step out of the house. They were beaten up if they asserted themselves. They had no land, money or property to their names. It was time we came together, but we didn't know how.

In the year 2000, an NGO, the Aga Khan Gram Samarthan Karyakram, came to our cluster of villages to create Self-Help Groups for adivasi women. It took us three years to organise ourselves. From 55 villages, 3,000 women became part of 248 SHGs. We were trained in the basics of banking, business and how to create a social voice using financial empowerment.

In 2003, 30 of us went to the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan for a training workshop. That prompted the real question: it is great that we are earning, saving for our families, educating our children and defending ourselves against domestic violence, but what are we doing for ourselves? What is the meaning and mission of our lives?

So, in 2004, we registered ourselves as a federation called Nav Jagruti. After months of discussions, we bid for our first project. We applied to be implementation partners for a programme run by the Asian Development Bank and the Gujarat Government on extending subsidised, up-to-date farm technology services to poor farmers. We won the contract, but we were so scared. We had never worked with farmers or the government. In fact, no women's organization to our knowledge had. We didn't have the option of looking back. For this three-year project, valued at Rs. 13.8 lakh, we gave it our all. We received a tractor, a trolley, a thresher, engine parts and a computer. We would rent these out at half the market price. Our target was to reach out to 500 farmers. We were able to help 650. On completion of the project, all the equipment became the property of our federation, and

we still continue to provide the same service. This project brought me into leadership. I could write cohesively, understand basic English and conduct meetings at the tehsil level. I had learned to work on the computer. So, I was chosen secretary of the federation. Thereafter, we bid for a NABARD project and created 100 new profitable SHGs. By now, people knew about our federation.

Thirteen of us started a licensed agro center to regularise the farm inputs business. Traders cheat individual farmers all the time, sell old stocks and don't issue proper invoices. We decided to take charge of inputs supply. We forged a dealership with a private agro company, from whom we source materials at subsidised rates. We also invite quotations from traders. We sell quality seeds, fertilisers and pesticides at advantageous rates, at a limited-period, no-interest credit.

I am also a very active member of the Shri Navjivan Adivasi Mahila Vikas Manch. We fight for land rights of widows, single women and daughters, who our patriarchy deliberately sidelines.

Spending time at lofC has changed the rhythm and pace of my work. I had a momentum, working harder every day, chasing deadlines and goals, without stopping for introspection – about myself or my qualities as a leader and a mentor. lofC has centered me, brought me back to the emotional core of my work, the integrity it requires at all levels, and the inspiration I can be. I know with clarity what I have to do. I want to strengthen the adivasi women's movement. I want to see the emergence of a new, empowered generation.

At lofC, I have learnt to spend a bit of the day, silently, with myself. It rejuvenates me, brings me peace, takes me wandering into the greenery, and allows me to take an honest look at myself and the nature we are a small part of. It is my treasure.



SODE MURALI (KOYA)

AGE: 35 | RESIDENCE: CHINTURU VILLAGE, EAST GODAVARI DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH
 EDUCATION: MA, B.ED | PROFESSION: FARMER

My village is where the Polavaram Multipurpose Irrigation Project waters will be.

The government is building a dam to conserve the Godavari River waters washing away to the sea, so that upland areas in West Godavari, Krishna, East Godavari and Visakhapatnam districts can be irrigated. The project will also generate hydel power.

Sometimes the Godavari floods. For the most part, it quietly flows by. We have lived with the river for centuries, in spate and ebb. This is the life we know. This is the land and forest and water we belong to. This is our culture and this is our history.

On completion of the project, Godavari will wipe us out in a way it never intended to. 276 villages in Andhra Pradesh, 100 villages in Telangana, four villages in Chhattisgarh and eight villages in Odisha, all primarily adivasi settlements, will submerge in the backwaters of Polavaram. Lakhs of us will be displaced. Countless endemic mammals, migratory birds, herpetile species and biotic resources will disappear, just like that.

A 10,000-year old megalithic burial site with around 100

graves, which has been found recently, will fade away into history again. About a dozen temples dating back to the 12th century Kakatiya dynasty will sink.

These irreparable losses can still be measured. Is there any way to quantify our emotional displacement?

In a way, we already are under water. More and more adivasi families are accepting compensation from the government. We know we have to leave sooner than later. The government has no urge to bring development to us anymore. Why should it? We have been condemned to submersion.

As a committee member of the Adivasi Samkshema Parishad, I am still fighting the losing battle. Once we are routed in earnest, I will focus on the relief and rehabilitation of my people. The government plans to give each family five cents of land for housing, apart from land for cultivation. Those of us who are educated will survive. I am not sure about the rest. I am not even sure if all of us will receive the settlement.

We may be left with some money. All else will be lost.



NANIKA JAMUDA (HO)

AGE: 30 | RESIDENCE: GOBARGHATI TATA COLONY, JAJPUR DISTRICT, ODISHA
EDUCATION: MBA | PROFESSION: LABOUR CONTRACTOR

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

~ Excerpt from The Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens

January 29, 2008. I had just joined college. I was arrested. The government accused me of leading Maoist insurgency in my area.

Two years before that: In 2006, industrial land acquisition in Kalinganagar had displaced many adivasi villages. The air rang with demonstrations and violence. 12 people lost their lives in 'indiscriminate' police firing. Men from our villages were randomly picked up, accused of Maoism and inciting violence against the government and industries. I used to attend the CPI (ML:Janashakti) meetings with other villagers. Though the party was outlawed, we felt it could understand our plight. I would write petitions to the government on behalf of families whose men had been arrested in the dead of the night. I was also part of the protests against displacement, like

everyone else was. However, I am against violence. I had not picked up guns. Nor did I have any bandwidth as a leader. Yet, the petitions I wrote made me a suspect. I had no choice but to hide in the jungles, afraid of police harassment. In 2008, the police picked up my father, a state government employee. Then, they launched a manhunt for me: At 21, I had become a dreaded criminal in the eyes of the law.

The police arrested me from a hospital, where I was recovering from cerebral malaria. A crush of patients, doctors and journalists were waiting to catch a glimpse of me.

I felt ashamed. I thought I had brought great dishonour to my family. I wanted to die. I went into a bathroom on the third floor, removed the glass slats of the window, and stared at the ground below. My father's face flashed in front of me. In a region where daughters are callously discriminated against, he had brought me up as an equal. I decided right there and then, since I had not committed any crime, I am going to fight back. I knew it would be a long-drawn struggle. I knew it would not be easy. Equally, I knew my friends, family and community had my back.

When I was in jail, for the first eight months I tried to secure a bail. Top political leaders across party lines, both national and regional, approached me via their emissaries, offering election tickets, and surprisingly, guarantee of bail. I was confused. What was my lawyer not doing that they could? I felt tempted, but I did not want them to manipulate me for political mileage.

I made peace with my jail term. I made some really good friends. I restarted my graduation studies and received my degree. When I lived in the jungle, we had to struggle for every morsel of food. The food supply at the prison was abundant. If poor people had access to so much food, many of them would not turn to crime.

I languished in jail for four years and four months. One day melted into another. Charges against me were dropped one by one. Naturally, none of them could be proved as they were fabricated. I was released in 2012.

I completed my Masters in Business Administration. Now, I work as a labour contractor for a steel company. I make an honest living. I give my spare hours to an NGO. I am planning to start an orphanage with them, to build a better life for children who have lost their parents to the Maoist violence and the governmental backlash.

lofC has come to me as a revelation. Now, I can think clearly and arrive at a balanced judgment. I have learned to open up. It's poisonous to hold on to grudges. lofC has helped me reinforce my views and apply it in life. I don't hate anybody or want vengeance. Even if I did, I don't anymore.



SACHIN CHINTAMAN URADE (MALHAR KOLI)

AGE: 30 | RESIDENCE: SHIRGAON VILLAGE, PALGHAR DISTRICT, MAHARASHTRA
EDUCATION: MSW | PROFESSION: NSS COORDINATOR AT ST. JOHN'S EDUCATIONAL CAMPUS

My father was a peon at the local school, one I used to attend as a child. When he developed psoriasis, an autoimmune disease of the skin, the teachers, who taught us not to discriminate against others, would not drink water that my father served. They would talk to him as little as possible even though they knew psoriasis is non-communicable.

A teacher can be the lighthouse of a community. What happens when he refuses to believe in his own light and digresses from his path?

Years later, one of those teachers came home. He wanted career guidance for his children. My father had passed away; I wish he were there to see the meeting. This is the power of education; it's a great leveler.

I wanted to be a journalist. However, I could not afford the post-graduation course fees. My second preference was the social development sector. So, I opted for a masters degree in Social Work. I paid for it with the help of a grant from a US-based NGO and a student loan from the college.

In 2009, I joined the Rescue Foundation, a non-profit that liberates, rehabilitates, reintegrates and repatriates victims of human trafficking in India, Nepal and Bangladesh. It was not an easy job. At times, it was thankless. Girls, who we would rescue, would turn against us. They would abuse us if a repatriation attempt failed. During one rescue effort, some journalists almost attacked us. They were enraged that we had stopped them from taking pictures of the victims at the Bangladeshi consulate. All the rescued girls stood up for us. They warned the journalists and lauded our efforts. It was a rare moment of validation.

I work for the St. John's Technical and Educational Campus, Palghar, as a National Service Scheme (NSS) Coordinator. I counsel students on available government community development schemes and the importance of social and civic responsibility.

Despite its proximity to Mumbai, Palghar is a poor and backward adivasi district. Its high number of malnutrition deaths is a constant national headline. Most people are daily-wage earners and small farmers. On days they don't get work, their families go hungry. I help them with paperwork so that they can apply for government schemes.

Our kids don't want to study. Bunking classes is common. The average age of alcohol and drug addiction is dropping. Youngsters feel there is no point in pursuing higher education. They start working menial jobs for instant cash. I regularly counsel and support these children, so that they don't drop out, so that they take maximum benefit of higher education.

lofC came to my life as a milestone. I met like-minded people. I networked. I realised that my problems are very small compared to that of others. I also developed a better understanding and appreciation of other adivasi cultures. I feel calmer and understand the importance of anger management. I know how to ask for forgiveness. lofC has enabled me to become a better teacher and guide for my community.





JACINTA KERKETTA (ORAON)

AGE: 33 | RESIDENCE: RANCHI, JHARKHAND
 EDUCATION: POST GRADUATE IN MASS COMMUNICATION | PROFESSION: POET AND WRITER

Our forefathers didn't write poetry. They lived poetry that was passed down to the generations as songs. Our history is unobtrusively embedded in our traditional paintings, medicines and foods, in our ballads and ditties, in the music of our instruments, and the rhythms of our dances.

The poor and the backward refer to me as a Dalit poet. The indigenous people say I am an adivasi voice. I say, I write about all the people who face suppression.

I grew up watching my alcoholic father brutalise my mother. He rarely acknowledged the presence of my two younger sisters and I. He favoured our brothers. They too, in time, became alcoholic, even abusive towards my mother. My mother ensured her daughters received quality education. She mortgaged the ancestral land to pay for our school and college. She admitted me to a residential missionary school. When I turned 14, I had to return to my village. I used to sell tamarind to help my mother run the household. From there, I went to Ranchi for my graduation in Mass Communication at the St. Xavier's College. Thereafter, I worked in shops to support my sisters' education. I also started freelancing for the Hindi national dailies Dainik Jagran and Prabhat Khabar. Most importantly, I began to write poetry seriously.

In the beginning, my writings reflected personal pain and humiliation. Slowly and organically, they transformed into a feminist argument and a case for the adivasi struggle. Through them, I talk about displacement, violence against women, hunger, and the ironies of forced industrial development that has ruined adivasi environments and displaced thousands. My ancestral village is a part of Saranda, the largest sal forest cover in India, a biodiversity hotspot and a critical elephant corridor. It holds in its underbelly one of India's largest iron ore reserves. Saranda haunts my writings like a recurring dream. I often talk about how its magnificence is withering as an intense conflict rages over its mineral wealth. Its trees, rivers and earth have turned a toxic red, shrouded in mine dust.

It was a Sunday, and I
 Holding little Posterity by the hand
 Set out for the village bazaar.

Coming upon a narrow path
 Amidst dry and withering trees,
 I said to little Posterity,
 Look, 'tis where the village river used to be.

A deep furrow in the ground ahead
 Swallowed all the mountains, I said.
 Suddenly, struck by fear she held me tight,
 A graveyard, vast and sinister, lay in sight.
 I said to her, do you see?
 'Tis where the barns of your ancestors used to be.

Many people said I am successful because I am an adivasi and a woman. I was in anguish. However, after I received the Indigenous Voice of Asia award from a Thailand-based organisation, Asia People's Indigenous Pact, and the Ravi Shankar Memorial Award from Banaras Hindu University, I felt validated. I received an opportunity to work as a research consultant in Jharkhand for a Delhi-based organisation, Feminist Approach through Technology (FAT). Next, I received the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) fellowship, which gave me a chance to travel among various adivasi communities and study their problems. I was also chosen a Changelooms fellow. It is a year-long programme that provides training, mentorship, and financial support to 100 young leaders trying to address issues of social exclusion. I worked in the Samtoli and Rengarih blocks of Simdega District and trained many girls in creative writing to provide a cathartic platform for expression. Some of these young poets were published.

I do not aspire to be a political leader. I wish to be a thought leader, a cultural revivaliser. Poetry and writings are a part of our lives. They strengthen our movements, give us memorable slogans and channel opinions.

At IofC, I have understood that we can't become effective leaders unless we understand ourselves and resolve our inner conflicts. I am able to look at the struggles of my life objectively. However, I continue to be enraged by the unfairness of the system against adivasis. This is positive anger, from which I draw the inspiration to consolidate our struggle.

The other critical lesson of IofC for me is honesty. I always thought being a hundred per cent honest is unrealistic. Now, I don't care how difficult it is. I will abide by the truth.

Little Posterity ran on - We're here at the bazaar!
 What would you like to buy, the shopkeeper asked.
 Brother, a little rain, a handful of wet earth,
 A bottle of river, and that mountain preserved
 There, hanging on that wall, a piece of nature as well.
 And why is rain so dear, pray tell?
 The shopkeeper said - That wetness is not of here!
 It has come from another sphere.
 Times are slack, have ordered just a sack.

Fumbling for money in the corner of my sari,
 I untied the knot only to see
 In place of a few folded rupees
 The crumpled folds of my entire being.

~ The River, the Mountain and the Bazaar by Jacinta
 (Translated from Hindi)



NIKHIL PS (ULLADAN)

AGE: 27 | RESIDENCE: AKKATETARA VILLAGE, PALAKKAD DISTRICT, KERALA
EDUCATION: FINAL YEAR M.COMM | PROFESSION: RURAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT EXECUTIVE

Reservation is a crutch that we adivasis are not ready to let go of. Before someone else says it, I want my community to say that we do not need it. Adivasis are hard-working people. I believe that we must compete and receive what we truly deserve.

Free food, free shelter, free education, lower marks to get admissions and jobs! All this is not helping us in any way. We will not be able to survive when we step outside this safety net. In fact, many adivasis, who have achieved success, don't own up to their indigenous identity. The stigma of being an adivasi, they fear, will label them as undeserving and incompetent.

I want our people to grow and feel proud of their adivasi roots. I work as a soft-skills trainer for the Government of Kerala, under the aegis of Project Shine in Attapaddi, an adivasi settlement in the Palakkad district. We train adivasi kids so that they can compete and get admission in better schools. We bring these kids up to the level of general students. A general student getting 90 per cent marks is seen as the norm. For adivasis, even 70 per cent marks is considered an achievement. In effect, we get admissions and jobs with 70 per cent marks that a general category candidate may or may not get with 90

per cent. Lowering the bar has pushed us back. Our kids and youth don't want to compete. We are being turned into a lazy lot. My organisation has designed teaching tools and techniques that help our kids get up to speed.

I see another flaw with the way we are taught. This may sound wrong and purists may not agree. I want our kids to be taught in Hindi or English. Let us also learn the languages that the rest of the population speaks. What will an adivasi kid do with just his mother tongue? Can he get admission to a premier institute?

The government and other agencies who are working for adivasi welfare should try and upgrade our skills. Make us ready to compete as equals to get what is rightfully ours and what we truly deserve. That would be the true integration of adivasis into the mainstream.

Our communities face discrimination even from government officials. I fight it. There are times when people feel that protests, and violent ones at that, might be the way to go. But my belief in non-violence and peaceful activism has been strengthened and emboldened after my lofC experience. Violence can't achieve anything. Violence begets violence. The remedy is inside us.

God's own country, that is how Kerala is described. Everyone is equal in the eyes of god. I want adivasis to be equal to all Indians. I plan to start an NGO. I work on bringing a change to the mindsets of our people. It is not an easy task. It is not a day's task. It's a long-drawn process and needs a lot of patience and mental strength. lofC has enabled me to persevere and introspect. At the same time, it has allowed me to network with like-minded people who experience similar issues and are fighting against them.





IPUPU MENA (IDU MISHMI)

AGE: 22 | RESIDENCE: ROING TOWN, LOWER DIBANG VALLEY DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH
 EDUCATION: PURSUING M.TECH AT NIT, JAMSHEDPUR

In Arunachal Pradesh, the sun rises around 4.30 am. Some days, my siblings and I slip out of the house around 3 am, when it's still dark, and walk about four kilometers to go for a swim in the Eze river or a walk by it. It's very quiet. We have the whole world to ourselves.

Some nights are sleepless. My mind is crowded with thoughts. What is my purpose in life? What do I really want to be? Do the elders influence my ambitions, or are they my own?

Then again, many people believe in me. They think of me as a promising young woman, who could be a future community leader. Uncertainties aside, I believe I was born for a higher purpose.

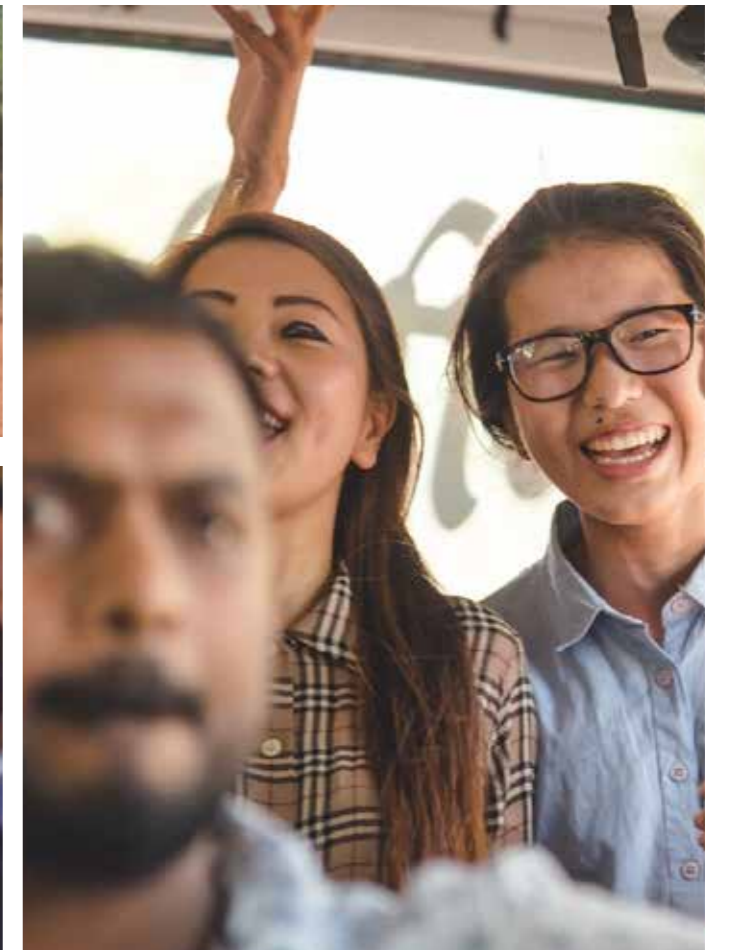
Even as I attend my post-graduation classes, I am preparing for the Union Public Service Commission examinations. If I clear it, I will become a bureaucrat. Since I am a people's person, I want a job that touches people's lives and makes it easier in terms of healthcare, education and basic civic conveniences. As a bureaucrat, I would be able to do that. My people suffer because of the corruption in the system. My aunt, who is an honest IAS officer, finds herself sidelined. Younger and more honest candidates are the need of the hour.

My other love is environmental sustainability. I am majoring in Water Resource Engineering. I volunteer with an NGO and organise their green awareness campaigns.

Whatever I do in life, I will find time to counsel young adults in my community. Our school dropout rates are high and often youngsters turn to drugs. They are not aware of the various academic and non-academic professional avenues available to them. They get discouraged by their poor performance in school, think their life is over because they won't become an engineer or a doctor and lose their way. The traditional career choices still hold sway. That must change so that the next generation can emerge stronger.

At IofC, I have learned that in order to bring in a big change we first need to put the small things right. It has taught me that the solutions to all our problems lie inside us. We need to listen to that voice with honesty. Most importantly, I have learnt how to forgive and ask for forgiveness.

I don't just want to lead my people; I want to help create more leaders. My life is not the sum of my individual successes. It is not about the Power of One, it is about the Power of All.



ASHOK DHIKAR (KORKU)

AGE: 27 | RESIDENCE: DOMI MELGHAT VILLAGE, AMRAVATI DISTRICT, MAHARASHTRA
EDUCATION: B.ED | PROFESSION: SKILL SUPERVISOR AT NGO MAITRI

Most of the time, there is no cellular network. The roads disappear during heavy rains. Subsidised food rations under the Public Distribution System don't reach us. Electricity supply is erratic, at best. We are in the headlines because we are in the grip of HIV. At least 6,000 of our mothers and children have died of malnutrition in the last seven years. This is my Melghat.

I am the son of a small farmer. I should have probably taken up farming or teaching. I have a Bachelor's degree in Education. But the grievances of my people took me to NGO Maitri, which runs development programmes in the region. I am a Skill Supervisor for education initiatives targeted at the youth and children. I head a team of 15. Concurrently, I am graduating in Social Work.

After the IofC stint, I have realised something profound. I operated like a lone crusader. I wanted to solve every problem on my own. IofC taught me about the power of ALL. We are bees in a honeycomb. Alone, we may fail against a detractor. But together, our results will be swift and effective.

Our adivasi brothers and sisters are unaware of their

rights to forest, education and governmental schemes. As a teacher and a mentor, I mobilise them so that we can solve some of the problems ourselves rather than wait endlessly for external support.

We actively monitor government health workers who are in charge of implementing schemes to counter malnutrition. We train village women in detection of common infections and diseases, so that they can, without delay, refer patients to public health centres.

Recently, I organized a people's protest against non-distribution of food rations. And rations came. In the special residential schools for adivasi students, the infrastructure was falling apart. We complained together. And the administration took action.

Next, we are working with the government on creating small livelihood options by responsibly using forest resources that adivasis are entitled to. Without any means of income, we cannot move forward. Nor can we move forward if we are not together.



ASHE KIBA (SUMI)

AGE: 27 | RESIDENCE: KEHUTO VILLAGE, DIMAPUR DISTRICT, NAGALAND
EDUCATION: BA | PROFESSION: MEMBER, STATE DISABILITY FORUM & PRODIGALS' HOME NGO

My hands are not fully formed, and I can't balance my body perfectly on my legs. I grew up with the brutal unkindness of words. "You are cursed. You have been punished for your family's bad karma."

My relatives avoided taking me to weddings and festivals. My friends and cousins rarely included me in their plans or introduced me to anybody. My classmates called me an alien. While they played basketball and football, sports I truly love, I spent hours in the ringside, cheering for them, alone. The deep loneliness within me grew. No one was really interested in who I was, what my views or feelings were, or what their veiled ostracisation was doing to me.

Disability is largely not understood. Nagaland has very few schools or support institutions for the disabled. In mainstream schools, there is no integration mechanism or special facilities. The community has not been sensitised.

After years of struggle and setbacks, I came into my own. I decided to be proactive. 2011 was my turnaround year. I fought for and won the students' union elections in my village. I was appointed president. I successfully completed the three-year term. As the next elections neared, the advisory committee was keen I continue in the

same position. They brought up the suggestion at the general meeting. However, one member stood up and said, "She cannot continue. She is disabled. She is a woman. She is a bad name for our village." The room was a confusion of raised voices. I stood there embarrassed, tears rolling down my cheeks. I had never been so humiliated. My brother was in the room. He didn't speak up for me.

I locked myself in my room and cried for four days. A few days later, my brother came up to me. He said, "Ashe, I know you are angry, but I did not mean to hurt you. I did not wish to fight with that man. Life is too short. Today will not last, and tomorrow might be ours. It's useless to carry resentment in our hearts. We must learn to forgive." His calm words healed me. I never looked back. I began to work with Prodigals' Home and the Nagaland State Disability Forum.

lofC was a life-changing experience. I met so many people like me who have led difficult lives, yet wish to make a difference. It is easy to drown in self-pity. It takes enormous courage to pick yourself up and fight for what is right. I have found my true purpose, and at lofC I have understood how to infuse it with positivity and happiness.

I accept myself as I am. I look forward to life with hope. I no longer aspire to a 'perfect' body. The 'perfect' people are dependent on others for a lot of chores, but I am truly independent because I have had to learn to do everything myself.

I am working towards greater awareness and also better public facilities for the disabled, like walking ramps, support bars, separate toilets, wheelchair and crutch-friendly elevators and low-floor entry doors in buses and trains. We do not want the society to sympathise with us. We do not regret our disabilities. We just do not want people to be hurtful. We don't want to be marginalised. See us, hear us, and understand we too want love, marriage, relationships and children.





LOBI RAZZAQ IBRAHIM (SIDDI)

AGE: 36 | RESIDENCE: JAMBUR GIR VILLAGE, JUNAGARH DISTRICT, GUJARAT
 EDUCATION: AGRI DIPLOMA | PROFESSION: AGRICULTURAL ASSISTANT, JUNAGARH UNIVERSITY

I come from a bit of Gujarat that is Africa. Three centuries ago, my people were brought from Ethiopia as slaves. Today, we are Gujarati Muslims. If you concentrate, though, you can still hear Africa in our dance and drums. You can see it in the curls of our hair and our quicksilver moves.

I was five when I was sent away to study in a good school in another village, where my aunt and uncle lived. They didn't treat me well. I was miserable. Whenever I came home for holidays, I would weep for hours pleading to my parents not to send me back. They had no choice. My village school was as good as closed. My father was a small farmer, and money was in short supply.

My mother, like most women in the village, was a forest gatherer. They would collect firewood, fruits and leaves. One day, a forest officer attacked a woman. My mother fought him off. Thereafter, she became angry and restless about the vulnerability and helplessness of our women. An idea had begun to take shape in her mind.

At 19, when I returned home for good, I found my mother deeply involved with the Aga Khan Rural Foundation. She had activated Self-Help Groups for Siddi adivasi women, training them to save money and start small shops.

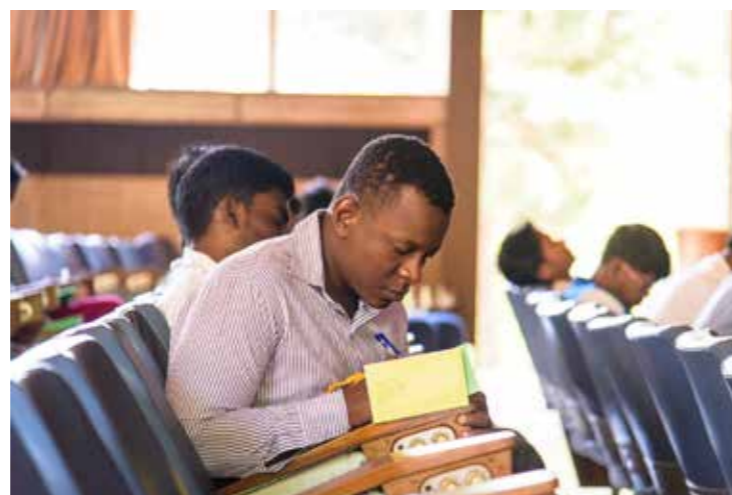
In 1999, she started her own NGO, the Nagarchi Mahila Vikas Sanstha. Under it, 800 women from 19 villages make and sell compost. It also extends cattle and fertiliser loans to farmers at a very marginal interest rate. It was a financially sturdy business from the start. I was roped in as an assistant manager and accountant. Unwittingly, I had begun to walk in my mother's footsteps.

Now, I work at the university. However, my after-work hours remain dedicated to the community. Given the almost-defunct state of schools, the rate of dropouts in our villages is high. Many boys are addicted to alcohol and gambling. I have created a youth organisation that rehabilitates them. We have involved both the police and the community to monitor the sale of alcohol to underage customers. We provide counseling every evening. The

mental and physical detoxing is a long and arduous process. We train them in basic computer skills. We help the motivated ones set up small shops that they can run. Those who are not entrepreneurial, we find them placements in dairies and our famous dance troupes that perform for travellers and tourists.

lofC has given my life a timely direction. I have come into my own. I have become honest in my relationships and clearer about my social goals.

Inspired by my experiences at lofC, I am drawing up a business proposal to use the Samvaad platform to integrate all adivasi communities. We can trade in indigenous products and services, by forging ties with each other, either in terms of partnership or as buyers and sellers. Business may tie us together in ways politics has never been able to.



ZOMMI MIMI (IDU MISHMI)

AGE: 25 | RESIDENCE: ROING, LOWER DIBANG VALLEY DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH
 EDUCATION: PURSUING MSW | PROFESSION: NGO WORKER

Why do so many people in my Idu Mishmi community commit suicide? Why is drug addiction so prevalent among us? Why is depression so common? I don't have straightforward answers for you, but my experiences may give you a glimpse into our minds.

My father had an accident recently. He was in the ICU for a long time. Not a single friend or relative came to visit or support us.

My friend and his brother had a minor tiff over the television remote. The younger brother had been perfectly fine the whole day. After the argument, he committed suicide.

Halfway through college, I had no money to pay my fees. My family withdrew financial support. I sold my mobile to finish graduation. I wanted to go to the university for post-graduation. Against my wishes, my family married me off. I was 19.

My husband and I lived with his parents and sisters. He was a schoolteacher, who also ran a poultry business. Three years ago, when I had my son, Pumsu, we asked him to leave the house because he is a drug addict. He

spends half the year in rehab and goes right back to heroin once he is out. In the years we lived together and tried to make the marriage work, he remained emotionally unavailable to me. I did not want money. I just wanted him to be there for me. He couldn't.

We might be a small community, but cut off from each other. My people are highly individualistic and overtly sentimental. They prefer to be alone. When they go through a low, they either turn to drugs or fall victim to depression or commit suicide.

Only after attending the lofC programme did I realise that I am not alone in my grief and struggles. There are so many people who have suffered so much more. I have begun to interact with neighbours who I never spoke to before. I talk to them about their hardships. I am empathetic. I actively communicate.

I am a single mother. I am pursuing a master's degree in Social Work. I also work part-time with NGO Aamyaa on developmental projects. I have to stay away from Pumsu for hours. It's not easy, but I need to earn for his future. My in-laws love and support me. Yet, at times, I feel intensely lonely. Memories of the days at lofC keep me company.

At lofC, I learned how to heal my inner conflicts. So, I reach out to people. I embrace my weaknesses and fears. And, I have a vision for my community. I wish to create an organisation that will regularly connect with our emotionally vulnerable youth in schools and colleges. Counseling and guidance sessions shall be conducted in groups. Participants will interact with each other and share experiences. Unless we target the issues that are making us weak, we won't be able to go on. We know we need intervention, but nobody takes the initiative. I don't yet know how to raise funds to create such an organisation, but I will. After all, at lofC we learned we are the change we want to see!





DINESH MUDI (KODA / KORA)

AGE: 30 | RESIDENCE: AMBA PASCHIM VILLAGE, PASCHIM MEDINIPUR DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL
 EDUCATION: BA, ITI DIPLOMA | PROFESSION: JUNIOR PROCESS MEMBER AT TATA METALIKS

What little is known about the Munda languages seem to have great relevance to several unrelated fields of inquiry in comparative linguistics, as well as to the prehistory of the Indian Subcontinent and the history of the Austro-Asiatic language family.

Of the roughly two dozen or so Munda languages still spoken, at least one quarter (if not more) appear to exhibit some degree of endangerment. Though Kora is severely endangered, with only a few hundred speakers left, some census say about 7,000 to 25,000 people still use this language. This high number assuredly reflects ethno-linguistic identity rather than linguistic competence.

~ Living Tongues Institute

My family migrated from present-day Bihar to present-day Paschimbongo during the British Rule to work for the zamindars, the aristocrat landowners. We are Kora adivasis, a sub-group of Austro-Asiatic Munda adivasis, who are the original inhabitants of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau. The word Kora stands for our traditional professions, cutting and sand-digging. According to the 2001 census, Koras are 3.2 per cent of the state's total adivasi population. In short, we are few in numbers, and our language is dying a slow death, eclipsed by mainstream Hindi and Bengali.

Growing up, we spoke Kora at home. I struggled with Bengali in school. One day, we were listening to some Bengali music on the radio, and my mother said, "Will there ever be a day when I would hear songs in Kora? I fear our language will be forgotten. Kids these days don't speak Kora. It's a pity." Her words stayed with me. I realised if we don't revive Kora, we will lose not just an ancient tongue but also our historical identity. Then, what would we be left with?

When I was in Standard X, I took up the task of putting the Kora script together. It took me six years to consolidate the content. Finally, in 2010, I published it. I had added to it a small section on the history of our community. The same year, during my diploma at the Industrial Training Institute, Kolkata, I met a student and told him about my project. He asked me to write an article on it, which was published in their college magazine. People began to take note of my work. In this high-speed age, words are easily forgotten. If I want to keep my language, it is important for me to document it thoroughly. I am looking for a linguist, who works with Austro-Asiatic languages, to validate my research. Once finalised, I will present it to the Government of India.

When I started to build the Kora movement on the ground, I was alone. Many people wanted to pull me down. After years of struggle, in 2016, I was able to register a 26-member committee, the Jagai Goram Budi Kora Samiti, which is taking the cause forward.

The beauty of language is that it brings you closer to your own people. What you can express in your first language, you can never express in an acquired one. IofC has given me a platform to meet hundreds of people, who inspire me not to let go of my dream. I may pause on the road to take a few deep breaths, but I am not giving up on the road. Look around us. There are so many stories waiting to be told. One day we might read one in Kora. One day my mother may tune in and hear a Kora song on radio.



MANJU ADMEL (BETTA KURUBA / KADU KURUBA)

AGE: 34 | RESIDENCE: SANIMADANA HADI VILLAGE, MYSORE DISTRICT, KARNATAKA
EDUCATION: SCHOOL PASS | PROFESSION: FARMER

We are here. We might soon be gone. Alive by every definition. Yet, 'untraceable'.

When the Bandipur forest area was declared a national park, our ancestors were driven out. We and other adivasi communities received no reparations. Some people accepted land from the government, but we were not skilled enough to live as farmers. We slowly tried to rebuild our lives and fit in with the outside world.

Today, we have an identity crisis. Our community is called Betta Kuruba, which means Hilly Adivasi. The government is no longer willing to recognise us as such. We are being forced to take certificates under the Kadu Kuruba classification, which means Forest Adivasi. We were classified as a primitive community in Karnataka; now we are just a regular Scheduled Tribe.

On the face of it, it should not matter. But who will remember us if we are classified as someone we are not?

It is not only the government and its policies. Even our own people are trying to distance themselves from our culture. They feel that holding on to it will prevent them from assimilating with the rest of the population. This urge

to blend in and naturalise is also a reason why we are losing our culture and identity.

I have two kids, a twelve-year-old daughter and a seven-year-old son. The secondary school is 40 kilometres from where we stay. A lot of children drop out. I too had to discontinue my education for the same reason. My daughter wants to be a doctor when she grows up. I wanted to be one too, but could not. I won't let that happen to her.

Our community lacks access to basic healthcare, safe drinking water and economic opportunities. There are no jobs. I am a firm believer that our problems started because we had to leave our natural habitat. I also believe that the solution will come from where it began.

I found a job as a naturalist, with a local resort. People who were more educated could, at times, not figure out the local species and their calls. No books enabled them to do that. I was born and brought up in the jungle. I lived with these animals, woke up to the calls of these birds and played around these trees. They kept us company, entertained us and, when needed, provided for us.

I had to leave that job to be a part of the IofC programme. I don't regret it. The people we met and speakers we heard were truly inspiring. A true leader learns from his experiences and not mere books. Much like us adivasis. Our communities should progress but let's not forget who we were.





ALEX HUNGRON (TANGKHUL NAGA)

AGE: 22 | RESIDENCE: HALANG VILLAGE, UKHRUL DISTRICT, MANIPUR
EDUCATION: MA IN HISTORY | IAS ASPIRANT

I was in Standard XII. My friends and I had drunk local rice beer a little distance away from home. It was a Sunday. Most Bolero cabs were off the roads. Suddenly, a white Bolero appeared on the horizon. We flagged it down and got in. The driver looked familiar, but we couldn't place him. When we were halfway home, he asked if we recognised him. We looked at his face closely and were shocked. He was 'Miracle Man' Armstrong Pame, one of the youngest recipients of India's Most Eminent IAS Officer Award (2015), who built a 100-kilometre People's Road without the help of the government. Embarrassed, we told him we had reached our destination, though he suspected we just wanted to get off. When I hesitatingly offered him money for our ride, he said, "Pay me back when you become an IAS officer." Those words have been my guiding star.

Inspired by him, I am a keen part of political activism that rallies for representation of smaller adivasi communities in the state Assembly. I am also the Finance Secretary of the All Tribal Students' Union, Manipur.

Ours is a village of 500-600 households. Quality education is unavailable. Since Independence, only about 15 people have secured post-graduate degrees, and only

about 200 people are graduates. Up to 2005, we barely had roads. Now roads and means of transportation are marginally better. Unemployment is rampant. Agriculture is the key livelihood. Many young people have been forced to migrate to bigger cities in search of employment.

I had deep anger issues. I was impatient too and not a good listener. Growing up in constant financial difficulties had made me hard-hearted. At lofC I realised I am not the only one who has had a difficult life. It has transformed me in small but important ways. I have been able to begin to change my lifestyle and attitude. I feel centered, more focussed. I see the path before me with clarity.

No policies for adivasis are implemented wholeheartedly; only 20% of the benefits trickle down to us. To work from within the system and correct it, I strive to be an IAS officer. My people have suffered marginalisation for 70 years. We have to find our voice both within the governance and outside it.

I wish to be a non-violent transformation leader. I wish to be another Armstrong Pame.



What choice do I make?

What does that choice make me?

So,

Ushaben Vasava left the disempowering confines of her home to create livelihoods for women and protect small farmers against arbitrary surge in input costs,

Lobi Razzaq Ibrahim gave up dishonesty in his personal relationships and went back to work for the rehabilitation of young alcoholics,

Pyndaplang Wahlang moved away from professional corruption and vowed to repent by spending as many days as it takes to compensate losses he caused to each and every person,

and Sura Biruli shunned the path of violence and aligned his activism to the path of Ahimsa, to protest against the Icha dam on the Kharkai river, a project that threatens to displace residents of as many as 184 villages.

By the end of the programme, we witnessed an ideological change in about 55 per cent participants.

50 per cent participants are graduates, and above, which seemed to make them more open to new ideas. About 15 per cent showed entrepreneurial leanings and about 3 per cent decided to scale-up their existing social businesses.

About 35 per cent participants, who work for NGOs and are budding leaders in their communities, said they received useful strategical inputs from the programme. A few participants, who run their own organisations, and some who intend to start, said that they were able to forge a strong network with other participants with similar ambitions.

Eco-activism and cultural revival was a strong theme cutting across diversities.

About 5 per cent candidates said that the programme motivated them to pursue public offices.

However, communication skill is a strong suit in only about 5 per cent. While within the community, the participants may not be shy and withdrawn, in the outside world, about 20 per cent candidates appeared to be reticent and withdrawn.

The purpose of the programme was to bridge the gaps. What is heartening is that about 80 per cent candidates returned to their homes and communities energised, vowing to become more effective leaders.

An old Cherokee Indian once told his grandson, "My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.

"The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee replied, "The one you feed."

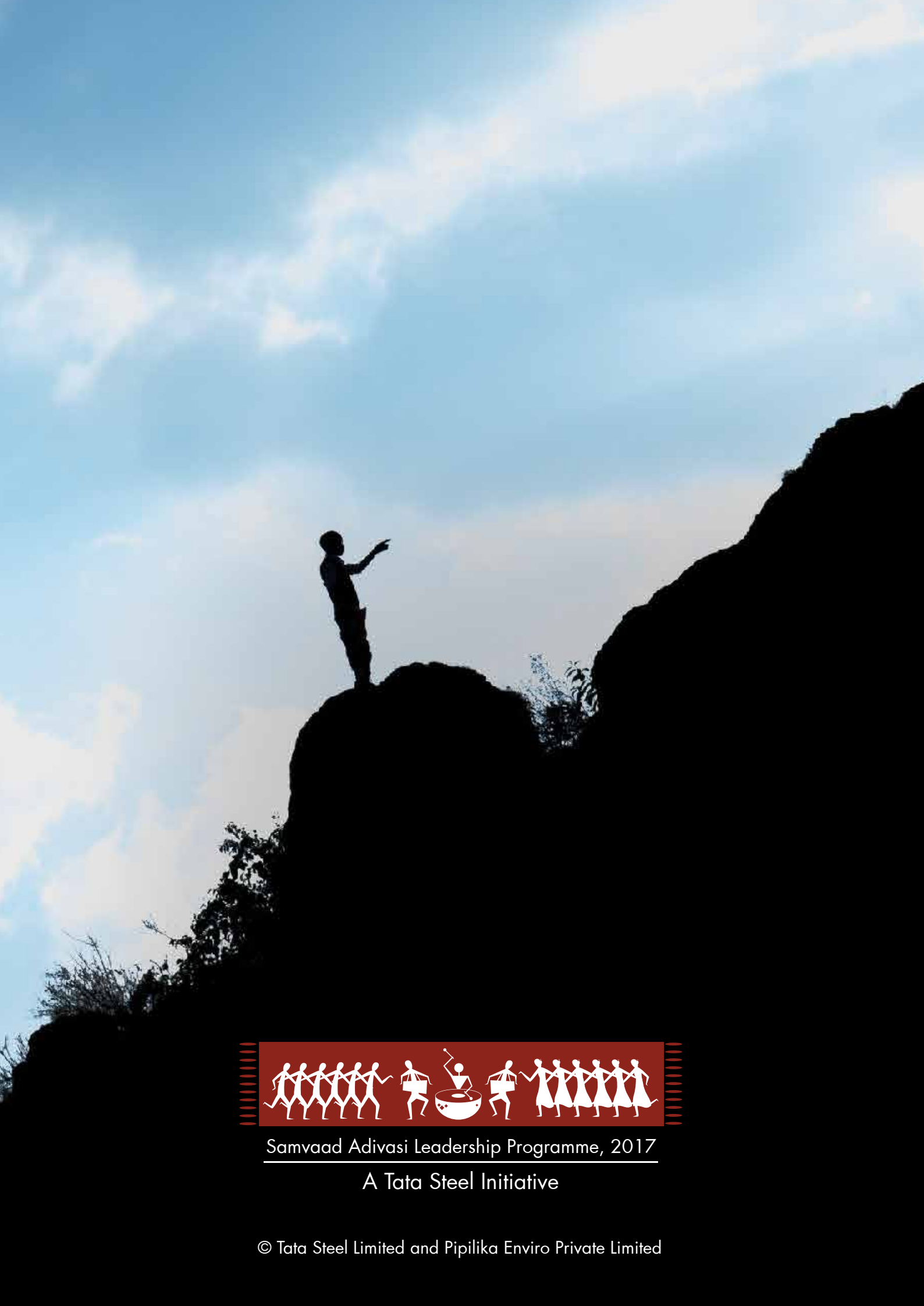
~ Old Tale of the Cherokee Indigenous People of North America





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