THE RISING

Samvaad - A Tribal Conclave

Organised by Tata Steel

presents

THE RISING

A Tribal Manifesto

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Dedicated to the Indigenous People of the World

“To separate the adivasi (tribal) from his land is to stop his breathing. If you want to see an adivasi's extinction, take him away from his land, as it is happening at present. It is a strange irony that when the adivasi could lead a life of self-reliance, he is being compelled to become disabled and parasitic. The adivasi, after having been uprooted from his land through the establishment of big projects in the name of public interest and national development, is ending up in slums in the peripheries of modern cosmopolitan cities as an army of landless labourers and domestic servants, losing altogether their self-reliance and self-esteem.”

Padma Shri Ram Dayal Munda (1939-2011)
Sangeet Natak Akademi Awardee

Munda was born in the tribal village of Diuri in the erstwhile state of Bihar. He received his primary education at the Lutheran Mission School in Amlesa and his secondary education in the sub-divisional town of Khunti.

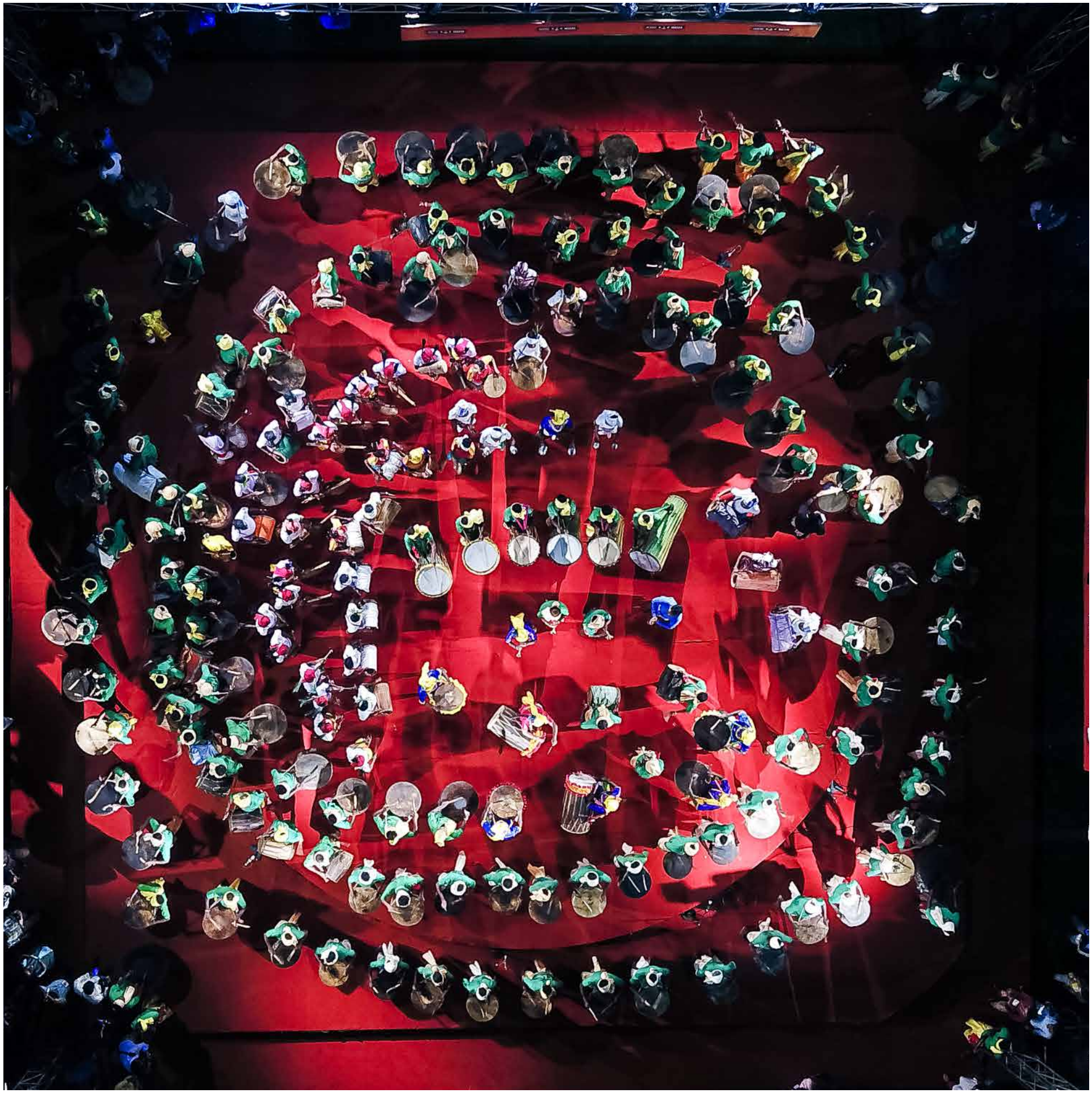
As the epicentre of the historic movement for autonomy from the British Empire, led by Bhagwan Birsa (1875-1900), Khunti attracted scholars from all over the world, particularly anthropologists. Munda, along with his friends, often acted as a guide to the distinguished visitors. This developed his experiential world. He opted for anthropology as the subject for higher education, with a focus on linguistics.

Munda received an opportunity to pursue his PhD as part of an ambitious, interdisciplinary research project on the Munda group of languages. It was carried out under the guidance of Professor Norman Zide, a famous scholar of Austroasiatic languages at the University of Chicago.

Subsequently, Munda was appointed to the university’s faculty in the Department of South Asian Studies.

On his return to India, at the request of the then Ranchi University Vice-Chancellor, Kumar Suresh Singh, he started a department of tribal and regional languages. It became the meeting ground for social and political activists fighting to carve out a separate state, Jharkhand, for tribals. Munda was appointed Vice-Chancellor of Ranchi University in 1985. He also began to facilitate the political dialogue between the government and the people’s movement. Finally, the Committee on Jharkhand Matters was set up to study and initiate the formation of the new state in 2000.

Thereafter, Munda retired from teaching. He served as a policy maker at the UN Working Group on Indigenous People at Geneva and the UN Forum of Indigenous Issues in New York.



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FOREWORD

December 16, 1946

The Constituent Assembly was deliberating on the draft of the new Constitution for pre-independent India. Political stalwarts of the Freedom Struggle — Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and Sarojini Naidu — were present.

A 43-year-old prominent tribal leader from present-day Jharkhand, Jaipal Singh Munda rose to present the concerns of the indigenous people of India. Educated at Oxford, Munda was a writer and an Olympic hockey player. What he said electrified his distinguished audience:

''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 (wild); that is the name by which we are known in my part of the country... 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 six thousand 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 Jawaharlal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, where there is equality of opportunity... where no one would be neglected... You cannot teach democracy to the tribal people; you have to learn democratic ways from them.''

Munda was asking for a separate homeland for the tribes of Central India, within the democratic structure. He was convinced that if they did not consolidate forces, their exploitation would continue. His demand was met with arguments of ''secession''. The Assembly leaders felt it would set a dangerous precedent in all tribal-dominated areas, especially the North East. Munda retorted, ''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 which is both adivasi (tribal) 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.''

Not unlike Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar's appeal for affirmative action to free his long-oppressed people, Munda's arguments before the Constituent Assembly ensured that tribal people received Constitutional protections in terms of special reservations in jobs and education.

However, the dialogue on the issue of 'Homeland' was deferred and was soon lost in the exultation and grief of a foundling nation throwing off the yoke of British Rule while still struggling with the gaping wounds of Partition.

2018

Over seventy years later, India is an economic powerhouse with a burgeoning middle class. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's Dalits have made significant strides in their struggle for dignity and political power. For tribal India, Jaipal Singh Munda's dire prophecy has borne bitter fruit.

One hundred and four million indigenous people belonging to six hundred and forty-five tribes live in the country. A full twenty-five per cent of them live in the poorest wealth quintile. Though they constitute nearly nine per cent of the population and live on fifteen per cent of our geographical area, the nation allocates only three per cent of its budget for their development. More than a third of our maternal deaths occur in tribal communities. Infant mortality rate among tribal children is thirty per cent higher than the national average.

Tribal India has also paid a disproportionate price for industrial development. Tribals constitute seventy per cent of the population displaced by development projects, which has dispossessed them of their bio-diverse forestlands, rivers and mineral-rich mountains. This enforced and state-sanctioned vivisection of communities from their sacred homelands has resulted in the gradual loss and eventual disappearance of not just traditional livelihoods but also ancient arts and performing practices, religions, literatures and oral languages.

In response, they protest. They resist assimilation, leading to flare-ups. They fight against misappropriation of developmental funds meant for them. Their individual efforts are suppressed and their collective power is oftentimes dismissed because of their far-flung geographies and diverse cultures. To mainstream India, the most visible form of tribal resistance appears in the forms of localised protest mediated through the lens of the dominant paradigm.

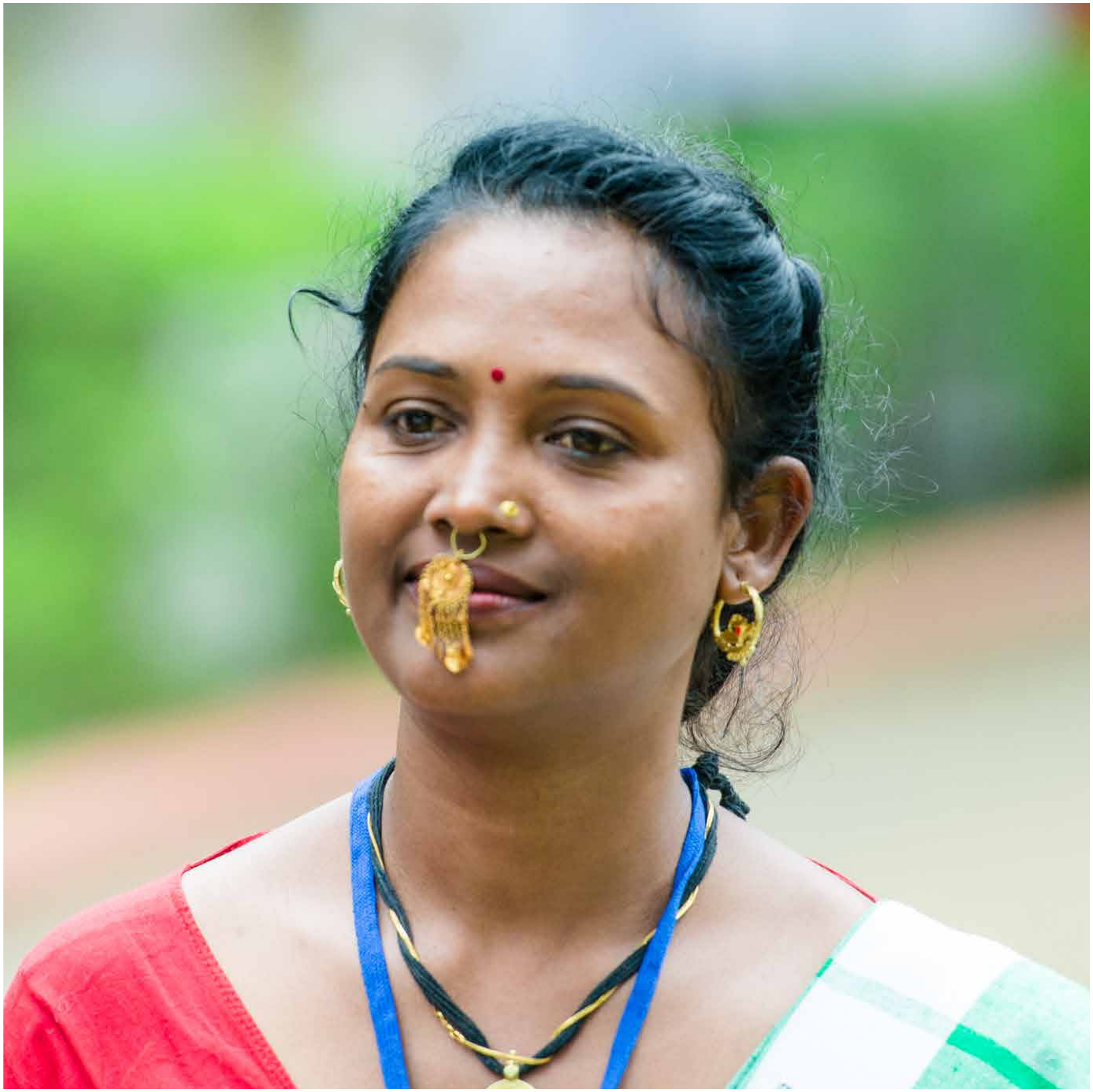
The government over the last few decades has patronised a slew of schemes to protect tribal homelands, health, identity and culture. However true political power remains out of grasp.

It might seem like cause for despair. And yet a quieter revolution is afoot in tribal belts across India. It takes the form of unique economic, political and social mobilisations, which are rooted in the core principles of tribalism. Together they threaten to topple long-held dominant paradigms.

Tata Steel launched Samvaad in 2014. It is an annual conclave of diverse tribal groups and their allies to facilitate the cross-pollination of new ideas and impactful developmental models. It is an opportunity to discuss and debate political and social mobilisation, which can then be translated into meaningful policy. It is a stage to celebrate the multiple histories, arts, languages and performances of tribal India in a primeval contiguity that geography and realpolitik has always denied them.

This book, envisioned in 2017 by the former Corporate Social Responsibility chief of Tata Steel, Biren Bhuta (who also co-conceptualised Samvaad), offers a glimpse into the innovations, mobilisations and activisms that have been witnessed at Samvaad since its first edition. It is our hope that the conclave and the book will act as catalysts to Jaipal Singh Munda's cherished dream — of the radiant threads of a united and powerful tribal India finally woven into the multihued fabric of India.

Disclaimer
Many of the essays in the book are based on interviews in languages other than English. We have tried our best to translate them in a way that keeps the intent and spirit intact.



02

THE SHAPE OF IDEAS

DISCOVER YOURSELF, DISCOVER YOUR OWN WORLD

An address to the tribal youth of India.

Allow me to begin by telling you something about the economic world. Present economics teaches us that business is all about making money; personal gain is at the core. It tells us that the more profit you garner the more successful you are. This belief system has created many of the problems we see around us — poverty, wealth concentration and environmental degradation. There should be two kinds of businesses on the basis of the two aspects of human beings — selfishness and selflessness. Current economic theory recognises only selfishness. Of the two kinds of businesses, one is the existing type, which is dedicated to personal profit. The new one is based on selflessness, dedicated to solving people's problems without any intention of making personal money.

What happens when we agree on the coexistence of both kinds of businesses? Something very important happens. Now we have a choice. We have to make a decision about which path to take — should we become an entrepreneur or an employee. We can do both, or select one. The choice will reveal the kind of life we wish for ourselves and the kind of world we want to live in.

The present capitalistic system, which is based only on selfishness, does not offer this choice. In fact, it deprives us of another — our economic role in the world. It takes for granted that all human beings, except for an insignificant number, will make a living by working for someone else; job is the only life option for them. I find this unacceptable. It is contrary to human capability. A job cannot be the destiny of a human being. It can only be a minor option. Human beings, through their long history on this planet, have demonstrated that they are natural entrepreneurs; it is in their DNA. As part of indigenous communities, you can feel it better than others. In your traditional life you don't prepare to find a job; you live with nature.

Capitalist theory makes you believe that job is your only future. Ironically, we are entering an age when jobs are being taken away from you without telling you what to do next. You hear about Artificial Intelligence. It is going to take away a massive number of existing jobs in the coming years. What should people do then? Capitalism has no answer.

Your generation is completely different from the past generations of tribal people. It's not that you are intellectually superior or more energetic. You are different because of the enormous technology in your hands. Technology gives you immense power to communicate with anybody, anywhere, learn from each other, and access all the knowledge in the world. You are a global generation, the most powerful generation in human history. You are not isolated. You have technology, you have the power; make use of your power.

To make big and quick changes, people take the path of revolution. Communism encourages revolution because capitalism does not offer any solution. Now, experiences in many countries show us that communism is not a solution either. It creates another set of problems as it fails to promote entrepreneurship and freedom.

Indigenous people live in very connected communities. Selflessness is pronounced in your everyday lives. Businesses created on the basis of selflessness, which I call social business, is natural to you. Your life's mission and lifestyle lend themselves easily to the concept of social business. The philosophy of existing capitalism is not a good fit for you. The economic structure I have been promoting is much closer to your beliefs.

You are capable young people, as capable as anybody, anywhere in the world. There is nothing lacking in you. You don't have to feel small in comparison to anybody. Have complete confidence in yourselves. Everybody is trying to tell you what development is. They talk about it as if it is a mystery that is beyond your capacity to understand. Forget about their 'development'. You work out what you would like to do to remove the barriers in your life and in the lives of your community. List out the things you need for your family, for your society, and start working for them. Urge the government to help you create those things. Make sure you don't have to go someplace else for education, and then someplace else to get a job, never to come back. That's not the path. The path is to have access to education near your natural home. Today, technology can do wonders. Take the initiative. The transformation will take place.

You are the leaders of your community. You don't have to wait for your elders to take decisions for you. They belong to another age; you are building a world they

NOBEL LAUREATE PROFESSOR MUHAMMAD YUNUS
Founder, Grameen Bank

A pioneer of microcredit and microfinance, Professor Yunus is an economist, social entrepreneur and a civil society leader. Microfinance benefits roughly one hundred and sixty million people across the world, most of them women. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for founding the Grameen Bank, the seminal template of microfinance, which banks to the bottom of the pyramid.

Grameen Bank supports about forty million people. That apart, Yunus Social Business, which is now a twelve-country network, supports many sustainable businesses. The basic premise of this initiative is that everyone is a natural entrepreneur. Right exposure and credit support can unleash our true potential. He believes that credit is a fundamental human right and that poverty will one day be found only in a museum.


DELEGATE

have no clue about. They can only bless you to succeed; they cannot guide you. Respect them for the sacrifices they have made for you, but don't wait for their instructions. Your task is to create a world that will make your community self-confident, self-sustaining and entrepreneurial, one that interacts with the world on equal terms.

There are so many resources in the tribal areas. The forests are a tremendous source of activity and entrepreneurship. If you look around, you'll see endless opportunities. Acquire new eyes. Old eyes are trained not to find them. Help each other acquire new eyes that will inspire you to become entrepreneurs and economic and social activists who stand up for collective rights and opportunities.

Forest resources are not just trees; there are varieties of possibilities. To give one small example: anybody in tribal areas can produce honey; it is not rocket science. It is not even a full-time job. It is home-based entrepreneurship. All you need is a little bit of orientation and entrepreneurial initiative. You can create a social business to collect the honey and process it. This can be replicated as a franchise model. Every home and every village can be part of this business. You can create an apex organisation, which will be a social business. It will brand the product, promote it in the market and distribute it all over the country, even the world.

Discover yourself. You have limitless creative power to change the world you live in. Discover the world around you. It holds out limitless possibilities. You are the one who can find them and put them to use for the people who live in it. You can create a business out of any non-timber forest produce. Even creating and maintaining the forest itself is an exciting social business activity.

The question is: how do you create sustainable social businesses for the benefit of your community if you are threatened with displacement by mining companies and large-scale development projects, even though you know that you hold the first right to the land and its resources? You have to put up a peaceful fight, not as individual communities, but together, along with people who feel for your cause. Once you scale up your struggle to a certain level, the media will support you and the legal professionals will support you. If you can sustainably exploit the mineral resources of your land as an economic activity, why should you give it to outside corporations? Let them be your buyers instead of displacers.

Do you know why, back in 1976, I named our bank Grameen Bank? I had been accusing the conventional banks of running their businesses only in cities; they were not present in the rural areas at all. But eighty per cent of the people in Bangladesh lived in the villages. I wanted to create a bank that worked only for the rural population. After forty-one years, today we have two thousand and six hundred branches across Bangladesh. All of them are in villages. None in the cities.

You have the same problem we had; there are no banks in the remote areas. How will people living in tribal hamlets access services of a faraway bank to build a self-sustaining economy? Let me tell you how we work at the Grameen Bank. Our basic principle is that people should not come to the bank; the bank should go to the people. We have stuck with this principle even though we have become a large, nationwide bank. Today, Grameen Bank works in all eighty thousand villages of Bangladesh and serves over nine million women. We still serve them at their doorsteps. We still meet each of these nine million borrowers, every week, to do business with them. If Bangladesh can cover every single village with one bank, you can create a bank that can do it too.

You are entrepreneurs. You can start anytime, wherever you are. It doesn't matter whether you are literate or not. You don't need formal education to be an entrepreneur. Microcredit works everywhere, for everyone.

As individuals, you can be entrepreneurs. As a family, you can be an entrepreneurship unit. All you have to do is to make up your mind. The present outlook is outdated; it urges you to find a job. In order to find a job, you have to adopt the culture of the job-giver. Be yourself. Remain who you are.

Build the world to fit you. Don't give yourself up to fit into somebody else's world. Your world is no less exciting. Discover yourself. Discover your own world. Don't give up.

> Everybody is trying to tell you what development is. They talk about it as if it is a mystery that is beyond your capacity to understand. Forget about their 'development'. You work out what you would like to do to remove the barriers in your life and in the lives of your community.

WHERE HAS INDIA'S TRIBALISM GONE?

Of all that God has shown me
I can speak just the smallest word,
Not more than a honey bee
Takes on his foot
From an overspilling jar.

~ **Mechtild of Magdeburg (13th Century)**
[translated by Jane Hirshfield]

In this birth, I cannot be a tribal, but in the next birth I hope I will be born among them, among empowered tribals who take pride in tribalism. I believe they can save the world. Yet, I place a caveat to this statement.

I have lived among the Kadu Kuruba, Jenu Kuruba, Yerava and Soliga tribes of the state of Karnataka for decades. As the years pass, I have developed a strong concern; tribals don't take pride in tribalism anymore; they want messengers of the outside world to tell them what to do with their lives. If you look at the tribal map of India, or even the world, you will notice that they live in and around the richest lands, forests, mountains and biodiversities; they have always had highly organised systems of conserving the richness of their environs.

I am credited with many achievements. However, the one I consider the highest is that I 'listened' to Hostel Masthi and Kempiah. If I have any leadership qualities, it is because I could spend a sizeable time in the company of these two extraordinary tribal chieftains. They are no more, but I carry their leadership lessons in my heart.

Today, India has marked Scheduled Tribe areas. It also ensures reservations for tribals in the Panchayats (village-level governance), state Assemblies and the Parliament. This has created an aspiring section of tribal leaders, who, unfortunately, are neither 'tribal' in spirit nor in the wisdom of the ancient systems of collective good and sustainability; some of them are merely born to tribes as a coincidence of birth. In Karnataka, it has thrown up a fascinating problem. There is not a single elected legislator who is from an actual indigenous forest-based tribe. When a case was filed about a decade ago against a legislator who had obtained a false 'tribal' certificate, he lost the next two elections. In the irony that is the Indian political and judicial system, he fearlessly contests again and again; the case is not yet settled.

Back to the 'teacher' chieftains, Jenu Kurubas live on honey; they love honey; honey is everything to them. So, one fine day I asked the chieftain Hostel Masthi (he worked in the local government tribal hostel and he got stuck with the name Hostel Masthi) whether I could accompany him when he goes to collect honey. When I joined him, there were four to five other tribals. We walked into the forest as they sang songs to the bees for forgiveness. After some time, we came across a large honeycomb on a tree about fifty feet tall. One of the men climbed it within a minute with the ease of a monkey. What followed was possibly a miracle. He sat on a branch under the honeycomb and put his hand into it. Now, I am a doctor by profession. Modern medicine has taught me that if ten to fifteen honeybees sting a person, he could go into an allergic shock and possibly die. Looking at my face, Hostel Masthi said, "Honeybees don't bite Jenu Kurubas." I said, "This is nonsense; how will the honeybee know if you are a Jenu Kuruba or not?" Not trusting either him or the bees, I stood a little afar and watched. The man took the queen bee out and rested her under his other hand. Immediately, all the bees followed and made a hive around his hand. He was holding up about five to six kilograms of bees. With his other hand, he sliced the honeycomb, leaving the top nine inches. The slice fell on a towel the others were holding below. Then, he removed the queen bee from his hand and put it back into the hive. In two minutes, the whole hive re-formed. No one was stung, not by a single bee. I said to them, "This is why you tribals will always remain backward. How stupid can you be? You climb all the way up and leave nine inches of honey! It's uneconomical." Hostel Masthi said, "You never really understood the song we sung. Do you know why we asked for forgiveness? The bees have worked all their lives for the honey and it's unfair to take it from them. We only take what we need for our medicines and food; the rest rightfully belongs to them."

If that is not leadership, what is?

Hostel Masthi would be drunk most of the time. I hardly ever saw him sober, except when he collected honey or other harvests from the forest; during these expeditions he used his best judgment to be as tender with nature as possible. If that is not sustainability, what is? It took me twenty years to learn the essence of his lesson. Leadership means thinking about others. If you can show

PROFESSOR RAMASWAMI BALASUBRAMANIAM
Development Scholar and Founder of Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement

Dr. Balasubramaniam is a development activist, social innovator, writer and a leadership trainer. He is a medical doctor by training, with a specialisation in Public Administration from Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA). He is the founder and chairman of the Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement (GRAAM), a public policy research organisation.

Inspired by the life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda, he founded the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement at the age of 19 and went to work with the dispossessed forest tribes in Mysuru district.

He teaches at various universities across the globe, on issues related to leadership, governance of NGOs, poverty and development, and global health. He has been bestowed with the honour of being the Frank H. T. Rhodes Professor at Cornell University (Ithaca, New York, USA) and is also the Adjunct Professor of International Programmes at the University of Iowa (Iowa City, USA). He is also a visiting professor at IIT, Delhi. He runs leadership workshops for the government, NGOs and corporates, with his niche areas being 'enlightened leadership,' 'adaptive leadership' and 'leadership in multicultural settings'.

concern even for a tiny honeybee, it is true tribalism. Why have tribals forgotten that? Why do they beg for jobs? Why do they ask for grants? A true tribal society does not depend on handouts; it is self-contained and giving. The world needs this paradigm back.

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The second chieftain was Kempiah, a Kadu Kuruba, an extraordinary man. I have learnt most tenets of tribal development from him. In all my writings, in all my books, he is a common character, like a sutradhaar (narrator) in a play who holds all the strings of the plot.

It was the agricultural season. Tribals, as you know, are non-traditional agriculturists. We lived in a forest along Asia's largest elephant corridor. The tuskers would often destroy crops. So, we decided to grow a crop the elephants hadn't seen before: cabbages. It worked; the elephants left the crop alone. At the market we found that cabbage was going for ₹6 per kilogram. We were thrilled. Except, we had no idea how markets operate. At the wholesale bazaar in Mysuru, we learnt that a potato agent only buys potatoes, a cabbage agent only buys cabbage and so on. It's a monopoly; the buyer decides the price because the seller has no one else to sell the stocks to. The agent offered us thirty paise per kilogram, only about five per cent of the market price. We were taken aback. Tribals love meetings. We sat together to figure out what to do next. We had to pay the transport charges, so we were forced to sell our produce to that manipulative buyer. The experiment had failed. I was disappointed.

Kempiah came that evening. I still remember he had his long hair tied up. He offered me some areca nut. (He loved to chew areca nut and carried a pouchful wherever he went. I would tell him that he would die of cancer. He would retort that he would die after me. Well, he is dead, but lived till the age of eighty.) I told him the whole story, moaning about how unfair society is. Kempiah said, "You have been living with us for the last few years; you have still not understood tribals. We don't grow crops to earn money. We cultivate because the very act of working on the land takes us closer to God." Now that is Bhagwad Gita in action. "You want money; we want to be one with the land. This is what tribalism is." I think Kempiah's was the last generation of tribals who understood this. Today's tribals have lost this wisdom because of outside interference and because of themselves; they have not inherited sustainable leadership. The Jenu Kuruba history is more than ten thousand years old. Now, if they have survived ten thousand years, something is working. If we don't rediscover it, not just tribals, all of us will be extinguished.

Every agricultural season, Kempiah distributed seeds and decided which farmer would grow what on the community land. He would give millets to someone, pulses to someone else, ask some others to graze cows, and others not to cultivate at all. Agriculture economists would call it a waste. But Kempiah had the intelligence to do it differently. Everybody in that community, in a cycle of eight to ten years grew every kind of crop; everyone became an expert on all crops. Expertise was democratised. Kempiah always left some land fallow. He would say, "I am responsible for the seeds, the weeds, the insects living in those weeds, the termites that burrow in the soil." A non-tribal farmer would spray the latest weedicide and pesticide and ruin the soil, but for Kempiah nature was a part of his life; he had an obligation even to the smallest organisms. He also had an obligation to let the land rest, so that it replenished itself, re-energised. He knew much more about the value of crop rotation than most scientists today. After the harvest, Kempiah would equitably distribute the produce among the families, depending on the number of members and the stresses or inconveniences each one was faced with. I understood equity when I saw him in action.

Leadership, I believe, is simple. It requires, as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902, a monk and a scholar who introduced Indian philosophies to the West) listed them — Purity, Patience and Perseverance. These are the fundamental values of tribal life. Yet, I see such restlessness, such anger, among the tribal youth; they want to change everything. They want the latest motorcycle, the best cellphone, and blame the non-tribals for everything they don't have. They fault everyone except themselves.

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I ask the tribal youth of India, do you have the courage to change the downward spiral in the narrative of tribal development? Can you cultivate the power of original ideas? Can you become entrepreneurs who provide livelihoods to other tribals? No battle can be won alone. Those days are gone, of the solitary hero, the lone warrior. You need powerful networks. You need huge social capital. Can you harness the power of communications and digital technology to create a pan-Indian tribal collective? Can you raise a voice in unison, representing all states, so that you are heard in Delhi, where it matters? That would be leadership.

You may fail or succeed. That's the beauty of adventure; you don't know what will happen. Go out there and act, because if you don't, you will not just fail tribal societies but all societies. To urge you, only about nine per cent of India's population, to take care of the remaining ninety-one per cent, even though they have never taken care of you, or even noticed you, is a big ask. But, when you voluntarily become accountable for them, they will notice you. Swami Vivekananda put it beautifully, "This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others; the rest are more dead than alive."

"It took me twenty years to learn the essence of his (tribal chieftain Kempiah) lesson. Leadership means thinking about others. If you can show concern even for a tiny honeybee, it is true tribalism. Why have tribals forgotten that? Why do they beg for jobs? Why do they ask for grants? A true tribal society does not depend on handouts; it is self-contained and giving. The world needs this paradigm back."

THIS LAND IS MY LAND

Our chance meeting took place in a city by the sea, the financial megalopolis of the country, overwhelmingly heedless to the realities of the other India. Jacinta Kerketta is a young poet from Jharkhand whose works have been published in various languages in India and overseas. It was a heart-to-heart. The issue is an open wound, throbbing inside of me for decades. Trust a wordsmith to lyrically render the pain. She said to me, "I am tired of being written about by scholars and researchers and narrators who come from cultures that cannot understand the attachment we tribals have to our land. The Earth is our mother; we are born to it. Our land is witness to all struggles, powerlessness, hopes and longings. It knows how our tears fall and mix with the soil after we toil for months and get back so little in return."

Jacinta's cry resonates with many of us who come from societies that were egalitarian in terms of land ownership before India was colonised — every member of the community owned at least enough for a homestead and a kitchen garden. Many tribes of the North East practiced the slash-and-burn method or jhum farming. They cleared tracts of jungles in and around the areas in which they lived, and carefully burned the biomass to provide natural fertiliser to the soil. After they grew several crops, they left that patch untouched for some years so that it could regain its greenery and fertility. This traditional shifting cultivation provided food security to the community; they did not grow to sell.

However, British colonialism triggered unprecedented unrest and rebellion in tribal India during the 18th and the 19th centuries. The British were the first to commodify tribal landscapes, displacing them from their ancestral forests and levying on them unfair taxes. The Indian Government perfected the practice when it assumed power in 1947, even though the policies of the British Raj begged reforms. Ever since, in an intended 'policy' of grave injustice, tribal people have been kept out of governance, while their 'development' has been crafted by people sitting in the capital cities. They are treated as mere recipients of development, which is often not in their interests. There is an economic complexity to this unfairness. Across the world, the richest deposits of minerals like iron ore, gold, diamond, coal, limestone and even uranium are found in areas inhabited by the indigenous people.

Tribals are a significant demographic mass of India. We are talking about one hundred and four million people, who live on its most coveted land tracts, yet are its most marginalised and poor, because they are increasingly and ingeniously being robbed of their land for mining. The laws do not protect them against this onslaught. The state challenges their historical right to their land, arguing that all natural resources belong to the nation. It doesn't matter to the powers-that-be how invasive, how wilful, how unsustainable and how uncontrolled the development map is.

In fact, our own tribal elite have participated in this slow but intense process that has divested the less powerful of their land. Which is why I react when writers and researchers bandy about the word 'community' as if people in tribal communities live in perfect harmony. A community in today's world, a world that has moved from an agrarian economy to a market economy, is no longer a homogeneous group of equal people living in a particular geographic region. A community comprises individuals and groups that command different levels of power, wealth, influence and ability to express their needs, concerns and rights. They are competing groups with differing interests. The more affluent also have more clout and, consequently, more negotiating power.

Caught in the competition for scarce resources, the tribes of Meghalaya — I belong to the Khasi tribe — find themselves without land. The socio-economic caste survey of 2011 found that a shocking seventy-six per cent of people living in rural Meghalaya are landless. As a columnist, I have time and again drawn the attention of the state government to the need for immediate land reforms. Without it, the landless oppressed might suddenly rise up in arms.

In the past, we have experienced militancy in Meghalaya and other states of the North East. In Nagaland, the secessionists have sustained the movement to a point where they are pushing the government to acknowledge a relevant piece of history — when the Indian state was born, the Nagas were not willing to join it; they were forced. They contend that till 1947 there were no ties between India and Nagaland, social or cultural. The rest of the outfits in other states of the North East have surrendered and joined the political mainstream because continuous struggle requires continuous flow of funds.

PADMA SHRI
PATRICIA MUKHIM
Khasi Tribe
Activist, Educationist and Editor of Shillong Times

Looking at this unassuming woman, you wouldn't be able to imagine the courage she carries in her heart. Defying death threats and continued intimidation, for decades she has persistently reported about the lawless inhumanity the workers suffer in Meghalaya's mines and the outrageous levels of mine-related pollution that has poisoned its lands and rivers.

Such is the might of her pen and activism, the Central government has been forced to form an investigative tribunal. She also campaigns against militancy and the narcotics trade.

The Government of India awarded her the fourth highest civilian honour, the Padma Shri, in 2000.

Meghalaya has abundant coal seams, which have been extracted since the time of the British, and later by the tribal people themselves. Here, coal is mined by the rat-hole method, an unscientific process that requires people to go down narrow entrances into the mine and dig the mineral out by moving in a horizontal direction. The coal is then dragged out and carried up on shaky wooden ladders.

In 2013, fifteen labourers died inside a mine that collapsed in the Garo hills. Their bodies were not found for days. This outdated process of mining has also resulted in Acid Mine Drainage (AMD) and polluted at least three rivers in the coal belt of the Jaintia hills. The Myntdu, Lukha and Lunar rivers at one time hosted several varieties of fish that sustained the population of the area. They are now toxic and devoid of any riverine life. Meghalaya is a hill state. So, the polluted waters flow downstream to Assam. After the Dima Hasao Students' Union of Assam filed a petition in the Supreme Court asking for redressal, the National Green Tribunal clamped down on mining activities in Meghalaya. Rich coal barons created a hue and cry over the loss of livelihoods. But NGOs that have been flagging the issue of rapid loss of forest cover to coal mining, and the environmental disasters that await the people of Meghalaya, say that it is the brief of the government to come up with alternative livelihoods; the state cannot rely on an unsustainable activity like extractive mining that benefits only a few tribals to address unemployment.

I have to clarify here that the land tenure system in Meghalaya and other tribal states of the North East are such that governments own no land. Land is owned by 'the people'. But, as I have stated earlier, the word 'people' is ambiguous. It has come to represent only the few rich, powerful and politically-connected tribals. Even the Common Property Resources that tribals share in an equitable arrangement have been commodified. Water sources and entire catchment areas are controlled by private individuals. It is common practice for those who control water sources to price and sell drinking water. There is no regulation that monitors this business. It is a self-inflicted tragedy of the tribes; only government intervention can restore justice and equity to this land.

How long can we go on in this laissez-faire manner? Meghalaya has rich resources of limestone and some of the most beautiful limestone caves, including the longest one in Asia. Unregulated mining threatens their survival. There is a tug-of-war between those who promote the caves as sites for international cavers and those who extract the mineral and sell it to cement companies in Bangladesh. A multinational company sources limestone from Meghalaya and sends it via conveyor belts across the border to its cement plant in Chatak in Bangladesh.

High-grade uranium is also available in this hill state. The Uranium Corporation of India Limited and the Atomic Minerals Division of Government of India have said that they are conducting exploratory mining, but people suspect they are quietly mining uranium.

So, a tribal society that signed away its rights in a bid to be part of the nation-state of India in 1948 now finds itself in a conundrum. It is the nature of the state to try and co-opt the political and bureaucratic elite in its task of nation-building. The tribes were barely consulted when the Indian Constitution was written. The Sixth Schedule claims to protect the culture and practices of tribes. While a few tribes have benefited, a majority of them are at risk.

Even while many non-tribal Indians are inclusive, there is a strong undercurrent of 'othering'. Tribal people feel threatened because they perceive non-tribals as more resourceful, more intelligent and more ingenious, with greater access to the market. The fear of the 'outsider' dominates the politics of the day, a discourse that refuses to die down.

In 1979, Meghalaya faced a bout of ethnic cleansing that targeted the Bengalis. In 1987, the Nepalis and Biharis bore the brunt. This period of violence was followed by militancy, which has ebbed. But landlessness remains a huge area of contention. It will become the reason for future unrest unless land reforms are implemented in right earnest.

> "Tribals are treated as mere recipients of development, which is often not in their interests. There is an economic complexity to this unfairness. Across the world, the richest deposits of minerals like iron ore, gold, diamond, coal, limestone and even uranium are found in areas inhabited by the indigenous people."

WE ARE THE GOVERNMENT

We have forgotten the foundational principle of democracy as guaranteed by our Constitution. Our elected representatives run the country from capital cities. In our villages, we are the government.

The community government or Gram Sabha, which comprises all voting members of a village, must plan its own development — what trees to plant, where to dig a pond or build a road and how to run the school or health centre. In fact, if a corporate or a government-led project wants to come to our area with an economic development activity, it must take the permission of the community government first. It cannot indiscriminately displace us or mine our lands and forests or ruin our rivers. These are national resources, but these are also our homes and livelihoods; we have a say in how they will be used. Since 2006, the Constitution has given tribes the right to our forests that we preserve, rejuvenate and derive our livelihoods from, sustainably.

Then, you may ask, why do we need state and Central governments? Well, it has to allocate development funds directly to us from the exchequer. The decision-making powers are too far from us to govern us directly or effectively. If we need help with forest management, we liaise with the forest department. If we need help with farming and irrigation, we coordinate with the agricultural department. We can always take a call in consultation with the government bodies. We cannot be over-dependent on the government. It can only do so much unless we become active participants in the process of our change.

Rich and diverse forests surround our cluster of villages in Gadchiroli district. Corrupt contractors and forest officials illegally felled and sold timber, even quarried forestlands for stones. We had to fight them for years before we could stop them. Once we ousted them, we could assert our traditional economic model. Today, we sustainably manage a massive forest; we grow and reap its produce as a community business.

Contractors do not think about natural resources. Nor do corporates. We do, because our lives are linked to nature. We ensure that the outside agents follow the principles of sustainable development. For example, they should not push chemical fertilisers and pesticides that ruin the Earth. We should grow organic and eat organic, as is our traditional practice.

Our next challenge is to curtail the migration of our youth. Our educated youngsters move to the cities for better opportunities. Undoubtedly, cities offer better lives and incomes. What if our villages could offer the same? What if our villages could generate equally lucrative opportunities with organic forest produce?

Of course, they should leave home for higher education. They must garner a broader worldview. We cannot stop them from going anywhere. We must not. But what if we fund their higher education from the community governance funds and inculcate in them values that will make them think, 'I come from this village. The villagers have supported me so that I can have a better life. Now, how can I help them?'

So many non-profit organisations come to help us. So, why won't our own children, if we show them a way to return? We have begun an on-the-ground study exploring this.

Every village produces some doctors, engineers, teachers and government officials. They have migrated. One out of ten may even think of his village, but he does not know how to help.

In one village in Gadchiroli, we found fifty professionals in government and private jobs. The community government called them and organised their meeting with all the workers in the village — farmers, local entrepreneurs, health workers and social workers. Each person received an opportunity to learn about the other's struggles. Finally, those professionals arrived at a decision that they would return home once a year to start, grow and fund developmental activities.

Once support structures fall into place, we can work on the next step. We can create direct agrarian market channels between the Gram Sabhas and the big buyers, bypassing the exploitative middlemen.

We have begun to experiment with a marketing model. Whatever we harvest, we can process it in the community mills and store it in the community

DEVAJI TOFA
Gond Tribe
Social Entrepreneur and Forest Rights Activist

A champion of grassroots democracy, Devaji led tribal groups of Maharashtra to push for the drafting and enactment of the Community Forest Rights Act. It enabled tribal people to reclaim their rights over forest produce, on which their traditional livelihoods depend.

Devaji's village sustainably manages eight hundred hectares of forests, deriving and selling their natural resources as a community business. Over thirteen hundred Gram Sabhas in the district have adopted the model. This has improved the socio-economic dynamics of the area and curbed migration. It has also checked tribal support to Maoist insurgency, which is largely triggered by poverty and underdevelopment. Most importantly, it has secured the forests against indiscriminate extraction.

warehouses. The market is complicated and the farmers are wary of engaging with it. So, let the market (company) come to us and buy from our strongholds at prices that are conducive to us.

If every farmer practises this, we will be the paradigm. We can invest some portion of the profits for the development of our community.

Tendu leaves, which are used to wrap beedi (Indian cigarette made of tobacco flakes) grows mainly in tribal areas. According to the All India Bidi Industry Federation, the processing of tendu leaves provides seasonal employment to nearly one million tribals in ten states during the agriculturally lean summer months. For a long time, the tribes sold the leaves to contractors, who supplied to the beedi companies. In Gadchiroli, community governments came together and decided to sell directly to the companies. We now earn three times what we did.

Mumbai. March 2018. Thousands of farmers came walking one hundred and eighty kilometres to stage the most visible farmer's protest in recent times. They didn't jam the roads or block traffic; instead they peacefully gathered outside the Maharashtra State Assembly, demanding a complete bank loan waiver on crops that have failed, fair pay for their produce and transfer of land to tribal farmers who have been cultivating it for generations. It is important to understand that if farmers are being forced to take to the streets, the country is not progressing in earnest. Equally, farmers have to stop expecting the government to take care of them every time they face a famine, flood or glut; they need to think for themselves rather than waiting with a begging bowl for the administration to bail them out.

What about planning ahead for the community? If we are the government in our villages, we have to become self-sufficient rather than plan from one harvest to the next. Of course, we should take help from the government, but it has to be a judicious decision. We have to decide the areas of development in which we should take its help in a way that will empower us. Our youth, with their understanding of the contemporary world and technology, will be able to lead us.

If our villages remain weak, the country will remain weak.

> If a corporate or a government-led project wants to come to our area with an economic development activity, it must take the permission of the community government first. It cannot indiscriminately displace us or mine our lands and forests or ruin our rivers. These are national resources, but these are also our homes and livelihoods; we have a say in how they will be used. Since 2006, the Constitution has given tribals the right to our forests that we preserve, rejuvenate and derive our livelihoods from, sustainably.

HOW CAN WE PRACTISE CONSCIOUS CAPITALISM?

The world faces a mammoth challenge — how can it become more inclusive? Capitalism, as we know it, cannot be the story in the emerging world order. It needs to find a balance with socialism. This poses many questions for us. Can we practise Conscious Capitalism? Can corporations enable communities with social, financial and infrastructural tools of empowerment? Can both parties, together, see to it that neither suffers from a sense of entitlement? How do you create an empowered community, strong enough to outlast corporate and government assistance and sustainably run on its own? If we can find a way to develop such a model, it will create a more equitable society.

Industry has always had an inherent tension with the owners of land and other natural resources that are fundamental to the processes of industrialisation. However, there is a greater and much-needed consciousness today that all stakeholders must play a role to arrive at the fairest solution and allay the tension.

When we launched the all-India tribal conclave, Samvaad, in 2014, we faced a lot of scepticism from activists and tribal leaders who were uncertain about our 'agenda'. It took years of sustained dedication to the cause for their discomfort to ebb and for them to understand that our industrial DNA has been linked to a tribal-dominated part of India for over a century; it is testimony to the fact that even if we are not doing everything right, we are doing many things right, and we are well placed to understand the need of such a forum for tribal India. After all, our founder Jamsetji Tata (1839-1904) laid down that, ''In a free enterprise, the community is not just another stakeholder in business, but is in fact the very purpose of its existence.'' We have been living by these words decades before sustainability became a popular word in the management lexicon.

We understand and recognise the need to enable appropriate voice and agency for the Scheduled Tribes of India. Post Independence, our Constitution created special provisions to address their acute developmental backwardness and their minuscule participation in government services vis-à-vis their demographics. The tribes are profoundly diverse — historically, genetically and culturally. They are geographically disaggregated; many live in remote areas where 'development' does not reach. They are reclusive, tethered to their lands and forests and show no natural inclination to either politically unite or assert their culture and history which are older and deeper than anyone else's. These factors enfeeble their voice.

Many of us think they should be introduced to modernity, entirely missing the point that their life systems are much richer than ours. Their natural instinct is to lead a quiet, joyous and free life. We are educated, yes, in a formal sense, but they understand the circle of life much better. They have a far greater respect and love for nature.

Samvaad is a one-of-a-kind annual platform where tribal thought leaders, decision-makers and experts from across the seven hundred-odd tribes of India and the world converge, meet, converse, ideate, brainstorm and share solutions. It has been a good journey so far.

We have created a platform. It is up to tribal India to decide where this journey takes them. Samvaad serves a larger purpose. Let the people for whom Samvaad is discover and define that larger purpose, create objectives and targeted outcomes, and decide what they are trying to change and what they wish to preserve.

We are here to guard against hype, commercialisation and the kind of politicisation that might sabotage content. Samvaad does not have to grow bigger; it ideally should delve deeper, deal with substantive issues that cannot be solved easily, that only a diverse and significant meeting of minds can address.

T. V. NARENDRAN
CEO and Managing Director,
Tata Steel Limited

Narendran is a mechanical engineer from REC (NIT), Trichy and MBA from IIM, Kolkata. He is a Chevening Scholar and has attended the Advanced Management Programme in CEDEP/INSEAD in France. He is also the fellow of The Indian National Academy of Engineering (INAE) and recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Award from NIT, Trichy and IIM, Calcutta.

In November 2013, he became the Managing Director of Tata Steel (overseeing India and Southeast Asia) and on October 31, 2017 he was elevated as CEO and Managing Director of Tata Steel Limited. He is currently on the boards of Tata Steel Limited and Tata Steel Europe and the Chairman of Tata Steel Thailand and NatSteel.

A member of the Board of World Steel Association and the Chairman of the Economics Committee of the World Steel Association, he is also the co-chair of the Mining and Metals Governors Council of the World Economic Forum. In India, he is a member of the National Council of CII and former Chairman of CII Eastern Region. He is also a member from the Indian side in BRICS Business Council, Co-Chair of the India-Myanmar Joint Trade and Investment Forum and a member of the Indo-French CEO Council.

OUR CHAINED FUTURE

104 million people. 10.4 crore. That's the number of lives we are talking about.

They are the Scheduled Tribes of India, communities sprinkled across its length and breadth. The concentrations are higher in and around Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, West Bengal, the North East and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. The numbers are smaller, though not insignificant, in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Rajasthan.

They are tribes, yes, for the purpose of political classification, but they are not a homogeneous people. They vastly differ from each other in language, culture, social structure, livelihood pattern and decision-making process.

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Tribal India holds a special status under Article 342 of the Constitution of India. It enumerates their rights to conserve their distinct languages, scripts, and education in their mother tongue (Article 350) and promotes their educational and economic interests as weaker sections of the society (Article 29). They are also extended special assurance that they shall be protected from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (Article 46).

More importantly, there is a provision (Fifth Schedule and Sixth Schedule under Article 244) spelling out the role of Governors that they shall ensure all laws and policies meant for the Scheduled Tribes are properly implemented. The Governors enjoys the power to modify, annul or limit the application of any law made by Parliament or state legislature in the areas designated as Scheduled Tribal Areas. For good governance, they have the power to make regulations and decide land allotments. They are also authorised to regulate businesses like money lending.

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We can safely deduce that the Constitution had 'secured' tribal India. However, something must have necessitated the surplus of special laws and court rulings that have followed.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, is self-explanatory.

Then came the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 or PESA that created space for community governance through traditional Gram Sabhas. While the primary focus of this Central legislation was to extend the Panchayati Raj system to Scheduled Tribal Areas, it also contains key provisions relating to the Right to Equality. Thus, the statute mandates reservations for Scheduled Tribes in all levels of Panchayats in the Scheduled Tribal Areas.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act, 2006, or the Forest Rights Act also lays emphasis on the Right to Equality. In order to protect mineral-rich tribal lands and forests from the multinational corporations, it gives the Gram Sabha (community government) the authority to decide whether they consent to part with their land and also the terms and conditions of the transaction in lieu of such a displacement.

This aspect of the law has been further reiterated through the landmark judgment passed by the Supreme Court in Samatha versus State of Andhra Pradesh wherein the court directed that at least twenty per cent of the net profits of any industrial or business activity in Scheduled Tribal Areas should be set aside as a permanent fund for establishment and maintenance of water resources, schools, hospitals, sanitation and transport facilities. This twenty per cent would not include the expenditure for reforestation and maintenance of the ecology that might have been affected by the development projects. Samatha, a social-action group, had filed a writ petition in 1993 arguing that the government was also a 'person' and hence does not have the power to grant lease in a Scheduled Tribal Area to non-tribals for mining purposes. Going further, in the Niyamgiri case on the rights of the tribals over their resources, a 2013 Supreme Court verdict upheld the provisions of the Forest Rights Act, which requires prior decision of a Gram Sabha before a tribe's traditional habitat in a forest area is diverted for non-forest purposes. The court further opined that 'since the Executive is enjoined to protect social, economic and educational interests of the tribals, when the state leases out lands in Scheduled Tribal Areas to non-tribals or industries for exploitation of mineral resources, it

PADMA SHRI
DR. SHANTHA SINHA
Anti-Child Labour Activist and Founder of MV Foundation

A world-renowned anti-child labour activist, Dr. Sinha founded the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation. It builds the capacities of communities in rural and urban areas to abolish child labour by universalising social education. It facilitates the release of children in bonded labour and helps them not only transition to a life of learning, but also ensures that they don't drop out. Professor Sinha has eradicated child labour in over twelve hundred villages in Andhra Pradesh.

For her exemplary work, she was awarded the fourth highest civilian honour of Padma Shri by the Government of India in 1998 and the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2003, an international recognition for courageous service to the people and upholding pragmatic idealism within a democratic society.

She was the first Chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, which was set up in March 2007.

She also teaches political science at Hyderabad Central University.

transmits the above correlative constitutional duties and obligation to those who undertake to exploit the natural resources'. Vedanta Limited, a British multinational, had invested ₹5,000 crore to set up an alumina refinery with a capacity of one million tonnes a year at Lanjigarh in Kalahandi district of Odisha. The refinery planned to source its minerals by mining the rich seam of bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills stretching across Rayagada and Kalahandi districts. After a long, hard and desperate battle, the over eight thousand Dongria Kondh tribals, who live on the hills and worship it, won; it was a crushing defeat for Vedanta and the Odisha Mining Corporation.

The wins, though, are few and far between.

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Since colonial times, the entrance of Market forces and the interference of the State have denied tribal communities rights over their forests and lands. All natural resources were deemed to belong to the State. The colonisers logged timber in huge quantities and destroyed not only the forests but also deprived people of their homes and livelihoods. This policy continued even after Independence; the tribals had no legal claim over their dwellings or the forests. Consequently, the exploitation of forests for the purpose of modernisation was so devastating that it impoverished the tribal communities. They were sacrificed for the industrial and economic 'development' of India.

Tribal communities have resisted the onslaught of the State and Market fiercely. In recent times, they have been supported by the civil society to take up the question of their land rights and autonomous status. The State follows a carrot-and-stick policy — whenever tribals resist, it unleashes unimaginable tyranny on them; whenever its legitimacy is questioned, it gives tribals concessions and enacts favourable laws as indicated in the earlier part of this article.

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There are certain contentious issues that have emerged while defining all indigenous communities (who are now called the adivasis by activists, policy makers and scholars) as Scheduled Tribes. Is the category 'tribal' really a homogeneous entity? Is it not a false construct that ignores the diversities in their culture, structure of economy, livelihood patterns, gender relations and decision-making processes? Such a homogenisation leads to stereotyping the tribal communities as living in sync with nature and its pristine purity, with a rich repertoire of music, dance, rhythm of drums that vibrates one's body and soul as well as the ecology and environment in which they live, as if they are unrelated to the rest of the country. There is also a construction of the tribal communities as being simple, non hierarchical, and apolitical, whom outsiders can easily influence. This has led to our patronising belief that they are primitive and need to be modernised. It has also led us to undermine their battles against the colonial regime as well as the Indian state; it has denied them their specific histories and distinct heroes in each of the significant milieus across time and space.

Further, there is a contestation that the tribal communities live in isolation and on the margins of the mainstream. It must be seen that they do not choose to live in isolation; they have been isolated. They do not choose to be on the margins; they have been marginalised. It is a deliberate construct of the colonial state as well as independent India that tribal communities are inherently backward. This gives the State a justification for its inability to reach out to them and set up institutions that are functional. When functionaries of the government — health workers, school teachers, revenue officials and anganwadi workers (village-level health workers) — are unable to work in their areas, it is understandable and allowed. The only officials or persons the tribal populations regularly interact with are the forest guards and the usurious moneylenders; neither represent the development apparatus of the State.

There is also an argument that in protecting the tribals and giving them concessions over land, the nation's development is at stake. The wealth of minerals and natural resources in the lands and forests the tribal communities occupy legitimately is much in demand by the Market. The scheduled areas are indispensable for the development of the industries and manufacturing of many products. While the tribal communities have won some battles, the powerful corporate sector, which has greater access to those in power and authority, has circumvented most laws; they have been able to manipulate the decision-making processes of the tribal communities.

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A current generation of tribal youth, who are educated, who have witnessed development elsewhere in India, question why the State has failed them at so many levels. They prefer to be part of the civil society in a productive manner rather than be exhibited for their culture. They are proud of their mother tongue and are attached to it but want greater access to mainstream languages, the languages of power and authority that would help them to make demands on the system and bargain as equals. They want all accoutrements that would enable them to get a share in the power structure. They have very strong alternative views on development.

Will they be the ones to turn the tide?

“Tribal communities have resisted the onslaught of the State and Market fiercely. In recent times, they have been supported by the civil society to take up the question of their land rights and autonomous status. The State follows a carrot-and-stick policy — whenever tribals resist, it unleashes unimaginable tyranny on them; whenever its legitimacy is questioned, it gives tribals concessions and enacts favourable laws.”

HEED THE WISDOM OF THE AGES

I grew up in a remote tribal hamlet, Khaksi Toli, in the Chhota Nagpur Plateau in Eastern India. It was the 1950s. We faced serial droughts. People migrated in large numbers to cities for menial jobs. I dropped out of school to help my family on the farm. Desperate for some income, villagers had started to fell trees in the forests and sell the wood, even though, traditionally, we have only foraged for dry firewood. A deep angst grew within me about our severe water insecurity.

Several years passed. In about fifty surrounding villages, fields as far as the eye could see lay fallow. We only grew a single crop, paddy, during the monsoons, the only time of the year we could. Inevitably, we produced little because either excess rains flooded the fields or scant showers left the earth parched, and all year long the earth eroded further. I knew we were doomed if we did not find a solution.

In village meetings, I proposed we stop cutting trees because they bring us rain, prevent soil erosion, conserve groundwater and give us a rich variety of non-timber forest produce. No one paid heed; the times were dire. So I started a social forestry programme on a part of my family's vast farmlands and planted one thousand trees a year. It took some time, but people came around and adopted the model. Wastelands turned green. We created forest protection committees and adopted a one hundred and seventy-nine -acre depleting forest and rejuvenated it.

Then, I suggested that we pool in money and build a check dam to harness the overflowing waters in the seasonal rivers and farms during heavy rains. All farm ponds could be linked via canals to the dam, which would act as the primary water reservoir and supply water throughout the year. Nobody believed me. Some even thought my plan would submerge their lands. Moreover, nobody was willing to part with community land that was required to build the dam. It took three years and the persistent drought to convince them.

We mapped the origin of seasonal streams and the locations of water bodies and constructed the first dam in the foothills of Narpatna village in 1961. We didn't take a single rupee or help from the government. However, the dam breached twice. Finally, the Water Resource Department offered to assist us and together we were successful. Learning from our mistakes, using the same community-based model, we built five more check dams and six lakes. None of these dams have breached. They have served over fifty villages for decades. The days of planting paddy once a year are over. We grow crops all year round and supply twenty thousand metric tonnes of vegetables to markets in four states.

Despite these achievements, the government refuses to consider our opinions worthy. It would rather listen to engineers who have no idea about our lives and community systems. A few years ago, it built an additional dam near our area. The project managers felled old trees and brought in earth and materials from outside the region, instead of using local materials. The final structure was not deep enough to store water. It flooded people's farmlands.

Our ancestors drank water from natural waterfalls. Today, our groundwater has receded seventy-feet-deep in some places. Lakes, reservoirs and ponds recharge groundwater during monsoons. As the government fills them up to build more infrastructure, we are headed towards a brutal future where we will fight each other for water and food. We have proposed that rainwater be harvested with the help of existing canals. But the government does not think common citizens are capable of planning and designing the structures they need.

At the heart of any meaningful developmental activity, in fact at the heart of any strong society, is democratic decision-making. Each community — every single member — should meet for at least three hours every week to discuss issues and solutions. Our cluster of villages follows this ancient tribal system.

Land acquisitions for industry are the order of the day. We need industry. We need it for progress and jobs. But our largest industry is our farmers. If the government leaves no land untouched, where will we grow food? We can't fill our stomachs with money. Let governments consider the communities as equals and discuss acquisitions directly with them and assess viability. We need to understand together which project is absolutely essential and why, and which can be done away with. If we don't want to be left grappling with protests and conflicts, we have to adopt democratic dialogue.

PADMA SHRI
SIMON ORAON MINJ
Oraon Tribe
Water Conservationist and Social Activist

At 86, Simon Oraon Minj, popularly called Simon Baba, has the energy of a child. He wakes up with the sun and spends his entire day on community development activities.

Simon Baba has transformed the lives of thousands of villagers in Jharkhand with his outstanding afforestation and water conservation efforts.

In 1964, his village, Khaksi Toli, elected him the Parha Raja (chief of tribe). He still enjoys the title and the support of his people. He has been appointed brand ambassador of the government's Watershed Programme in Jharkhand.

The Government of India awarded him the fourth highest civilian honour, the Padma Shri, in 2016.

A CLASSROOM TO CONSIDER

We tribals come from the same origins as the million other creatures and humans of this planet. Whoever is born will die, tribal or non-tribal. So what have we done to be treated in such a demeaning and domineering manner by the 'developed' society?

They say we are poor, we are backward. This is true. A lot of us are uneducated as well. But how is any of this our fault or creation? How does that make us less human than others? All tribals are not one community; we have had to come together to fight the common oppression.

Like every other person in my community, my fate was sealed from the beginning. I worked day in and day out, doing whatever was available to make ends meet. Later I realised I had to do something more, something bigger and better with my life. For this, I needed to leave my family. It seemed like a very daunting task.

Back in the day, tribals could not work everywhere. The concept of offices or workplaces and interaction with people outside our community was very alien to us. I had only seen my father work for 'big' people. He was a watchman. We opened ourselves to the outside world only much later and by bartering our services. We asked for help from people who were better at some things than we are and in return offered them assistance in their work.

What makes me love tribals so much is that we are industrious and we never refuse work. What is unfortunate though is that we think of today, only today. We are not able to think of tomorrow or look at the bigger picture. We are so poor that we must take care of our basic, everyday needs before we can create a vision for our lives. We live from day to day, without a thought about our living conditions or education. We are caught up in feeding our hungry stomachs.

The only wealth we possess apart from our uncertain daily wages is our language. As we lose this wealth of language due to non-practice and dominance of other languages, we see our identity eroding. To be able to do something great, one has to get out of the shell, see and learn what the world is doing and have the will to compete. Some of us have done this while others have lost their way, become corrupt and abandoned traditional ways of tribal living.

It is very important to not only speak our own language but also the language most used in the nation. This will help us walk alongside all others. My mother tongue is useful at home and in my community; it will not help me in the world outside. We must keep this in mind.

Forums like Samvaad strengthen the bond between tribals. But who will take the baton to preserve the languages that make us who we are? Irrespective of what tribals are doing with their language, it is my duty to make their identity and presence felt.

This is why I founded the Tribal Vikas Samiti. This organisation works to give a voice to the oppressed communities. Education is central to our work.

Mistakes are being made in the field of education in two ways today. First, millions of people cannot access education and, second, those who access it do not receive the right type of education. On the one hand there is a lack of education, on the other, mis-education. The present system of education is concerned only with two faculties of the learner — memory and the capacity to argue. There are several other faculties more important than these, like empathy, the ability to promote equality, vocations and practical skills, but little attention is given to their development.

As the freedom fighter and great social reformer Acharya Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982) said, "This education is of no use given the needs of the country. The state of affairs is such that a boy starting from the age of six continues to study till the age of twenty or twenty-one. For these fifteen years, he does no work or labour. He is incapable of withstanding the clemencies of weather or of doing anything, be it agriculture, carpentry, weaving or cooking. He has no knowledge of dietetics. He comes out of school without any preparation for practical living."

Tribals cannot grow unless they have education. That education has to be practical. It should have the ability to teach our youth how to envision a better future.

PADMA SHRI
TULASI MUNDA
Munda Tribe
Founder, Adivasi Vikas Samiti Schools

"You are a girl! You can't!" All the people who said this to Munda can be accused of gross underestimation. Born in a poor tribal family in Odisha, she saw her family struggle to make ends meet. They couldn't send her to school, so she pursued education informally.

When she came of age, she formed the Adivasi Vikas Samiti to make education accessible to the poorest tribals. The first school started with a handful of students. Today there are seventeen schools that have brought education to over twenty thousand children.

A believer in Gandhian thoughts, she was also motivated by the socialist Bhoodan movement of Vinoba Bhave in the 1950s that gave land to the landless.

Fondly called Tulasi Apa, the Government of India awarded her the fourth highest civilian honour, the Padma Shri, in 2016.

THE PEACEFUL SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH

For over seventy years, since our nation was born, tribal India, especially in the North East, has criticised the government for not doing enough. Valid as that accusation may be, what have we done for ourselves? By now, we should have been able to resolve inter-tribal differences, created dialogues and arrived at solutions on common issues. No wonder, we cannot cohesively articulate our demands before the nation.

For over seventy years we have demanded that the government build us schools, healthcare centres and roads. It's not that the government is not doing any of this. Yet, our systems don't run smoothly; the change is incremental. We react with anger. We blame. We don't ask ourselves how valid our anger is, who are the people we are blaming, and what would we gain by blaming them.

People in mainstream India also face problems. They deliberate on public platforms and in the media. They don't pick up arms. But we opt for armed movements. If you leave the Kashmir valley out and look at the geographical pockets where people have opted for armed insurgency, tribal India blinks red.

Why do we pick up guns? We know we can't fight and win against the might of the Indian Army. Still we persist. Where do these guns and ammunitions come from? They come from our hearts. We attempt to destroy if our demands are not met favourably.

We are angry about a hundred injustices. Our voices have not been heard for decades. We have been intellectually, economically and politically isolated. To give us mainstream exposure, the government and the NGOs create education, health and livelihood programmes, and rightly so. However, shouldn't they equally sensitise non-tribals? I find it incomprehensible that in a country as ethnically diverse as ours, we still face discrimination because we look 'different'.

A Cabinet minister visited the North East and proclaimed a 'zero tolerance' policy vis-a-vis student protests. How can the government disown its young citizens who are taking to the streets to challenge the violation of their constitutional rights? One can object to violence, but to say the government will not tolerate protests is absurd.

The government openly blames the lack of industrial and economic development in the North East, citing lack of peace and security. Show me a place in this country that is truly peaceful and secure. Every state has its issues. In tribal belts of Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, simmering with Maoist insurgency, infrastructure and industry are booming. Assam has been peaceful for years, but the government has shown no interest.

The rich and the powerful are proud to live in the national capital, Delhi. Except, the city is choked with toxic air; people can't breathe. Yamuna river is practically industrial sludge. Our air is clean. Our forests thrive. Our rivers are pristine. But we won't get any credit, will we? When we ask for sustainable development, we are accused of blocking development. When we protest against indiscriminate mining, we are abused. We want industry and infrastructure, but why should we choose a model of development that will destroy us?

We must nurse our anger and examine it carefully. I was angry at Assam because I believed the state was ruling over the Bodo tribals unjustly. I was angry with India for not doing anything about this oppression. But who was I really angry with? Was I angry with all the people of Assam and India? No. I was angry with the few who wielded political power.

What gives me heart is something that unfolded recently, a lesson, an example of how anger can be harnessed towards a solution. In the aftermath of the gang rape and subsequent death of medical intern Nirbhaya in 2012, the gang rape and murder of eight-year-old Asifa in January 2018, and the gang rape and murder of a nine-year-old girl in Surat, there were no riots or bullets. But the forceful waves of non-violent protests across the country reverberated across the world. The government had no choice but to respond with a powerful legislation that recommends life imprisonment to death penalty, on a case-to-case basis. People could have found and killed the perpetrators. It wouldn't have been difficult. But the voice of non-violence emerged stronger.

PROMOD BODO
Bodo Tribe
President, All Bodo Students Union (ABSU)

A peace builder and the current President of ABSU, Promod has guided the organisation towards non-violence. It is no mean feat considering that the Bodo demand for a separate state has been a bloody and protracted battle.

In times when most movements for self-determination are forged on aggression and destructive protests, ABSU, under Promod, has adopted the Gandhian way of peaceful agitation as its guiding principle.

IT'S TIME FOR CSR 2.0

To developmentally engage with tribal populations in India, there are two significant aspects to consider — their economic disempowerment and their lack of voice in governance.

Tribal communities are disaggregated in terms of geography, culture and context; Indian tribalism is bereft of a common identity. Therefore, though the economic empowerment agenda in the country is increasingly becoming centralised, for tribes, a decentralised approach perhaps works best. We may not be able to design an umbrella programme for, say, a hundred thousand tribals but we must have the blueprint to work effectively with much, much lower numbers.

Economic upliftment of tribals is not overwhelmingly related to jobs and employment, or what industries can do for them; they are seen to respond better and in bigger numbers to community entrepreneurships, co-created within their own milieus. The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) vision of tomorrow should be able to recognise this and design livelihood solutions accordingly.

As far as the tribal political voice is concerned, there is a genuine need and demand for an increase in representation of young men and women in governance. It is nearly impossible to walk into a system and be seen and heard without preparation. We have to lay the groundwork in which young, indigenous, emerging change-makers from every corner of India find the highest level of leadership and vision-building training, networking, and self-reformation to emerge as tall leaders, say a decade from now. Through Samvaad, the all-India tribal conclave, we have begun to collaborate with them so that they can translate their dreams into actual participation, so that they can save indigenousity, accept the right amount of modernity, integrate better with mainstream India, fight for issues they feel closest to and guide their communities towards what they believe is the ideal conclusion. The attempt here is to collectively inculcate and incubate values and concepts that find inspiration in humble and rooted traditions of tribalism.

In the process, we must take due care that we don't prescribe values to them or patronise them into adopting a certain way of life. It is for them to decide what their value system should be and how it should manifest itself. At Samvaad, a lot of what we are going to be able to do in the next ten years is a function of what we have gradually built up over the last five years. Samvaad means a lot to us as a company and as individuals in the team; we feel that we are onto something that is hugely relevant. As a company, we have worked with tribal populations, been dependent on them, and co-existed with them for over ten decades — long enough for the relationship to move from shared history to shared context.

So even as corporates lean toward the Right, ideologically speaking, and tribal voices are more Left of Centre, we believe in proactively engaging with the latter. We believe in placing the community at the centre of our very existence.

> Economic upliftment of tribals is not overwhelmingly related to jobs and employment, or what industries can do for them; they are seen to respond better and in bigger numbers to community entrepreneurships, created within their own milieus. The Corporate Social Responsibility vision of tomorrow should be able to recognise this and design livelihood solutions accordingly.

SOURAV ROY
Chief of CSR, Tata Steel

Roy began his career in the development space working with the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and then various NGOs. He joined the Tata Group through the Tata Administrative Services in 2007 and worked across the domains of corporate finance and strategy before returning to explore the development space through the lens of responsible business.

In his last engagement, he anchored the strategy vertical of the Tata Sustainability Group that works with Tata companies to integrate social and environmental aspects within their approaches to business. Parallelly, he created a disaster response framework for the Tatas, while managing post disaster-relief and long-term rehabilitation programmes in Uttarakhand, Assam, Jammu & Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh and Nepal.

Roy is a postgraduate in Business Management from the Indian Institute of Management (Ahmedabad) and Business Law from the National Law School (Bangalore) and retains an avid interest in exploring responsible capitalism.

RECALL

THE FOLK HEALERS

HAIL THE HEALTH SYSTEMS OF THE 'OTHER' INDIA

The Gond tribe of the district of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra worships Mother Goddess Danteshwari Devi. Every auspicious occasion is graced with her name. My wife and I have lived among them for over three decades. Therefore, as is their tradition, I invoke her as I begin.

This clear, blue, infinite dome of a sky that we live under has been a close witness to thousands of years of tribal life on Earth. Tribal people possess a unique ability to live in nature, with nature, in harmony with its rhythms. Everything significant they do is under the open sky; small houses suffocate them. Many tribal lifestyles, dialects and cultures sustain under this sky, but the tribes, dispersed geographically, are rarely able to interact. In enabling their meeting under one roof, Samvaad has created a historic milestone.

Samvaad is not a platform for monologues or holding forth on problems endlessly; this is a platform for dialogues and solutions. Tribals are treated as downtrodden — as people who do not partake of education, avoid mainstream medication, are unaware and make uninformed choices.

These oft-mentioned untruths make tribals believe they are weak; they are not. They are over a hundred million strong in India (three hundred million worldwide), a force in numbers that can achieve anything once determined. They can share with the world their invaluable collective wisdom, knowledge, arts and medicinal know-how.

I was in Australia a few months ago to attend a similar conclave. In the white countries, aboriginals would be shot dead because white supremacists believed they were of no use. In 1901, when the Constitution came into effect and Australia became a country, it did not acknowledge the tribal people as human beings; they were deemed a part of the flora and fauna. For the next seven decades, hundreds of indigenous children were taken away from their families as part of an assimilation drive, taught to reject their heritage and forced to adopt white culture.

In the United States of America, Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the country and a renowned academic and thinker of the 18th Century, passed official orders to ensure that the tribals turn into alcoholics. He said, "If it be the design of Providence to extirpate these Savages in order to make room for cultivators of the Earth, it seems not improbable that rum may be the appointed means." The tribes ended up ruining themselves. Many died. The ones that did not were subjected to a different kind of oppression. The children were forcibly reared in boarding schools, educated in the national language and given mainstream jobs and exposure. This put them miles away from their culture, tradition, language and everything that made them a tribal.

In comparison, the tribals of India have been able to protect their identities better. But, in terms of access to development and healthcare, they lag far behind. For decades, they have been among the poorest and most marginalised. They have experienced extreme levels of health deprivation. They lag behind the national average on several vital public health indicators.

Many tribal areas have zero accessibility. The government has provided for the establishment of Primary Health Centres (PHCs) for every twenty thousand people and sub-centres for every three thousand people, yet quality healthcare is not available to them. Currently as the Chairman of the Expert Committee on Tribal Health, Government of India, I am reviewing the state of health in tribal areas. Often the buildings are constructed but the healthcare is not delivered due to the lack of personnel — doctors, nurses, lab technicians, health workers — or due to poor motivation and management or unavailability of money. Even wider is the cultural gap between the tribal people and formal health services.

Today, the tribals are grappling with four major health issues: malaria, mortality, malnutrition and mental health (in terms of addictions). To address them sustainably, first it is critical that a functioning healthcare system is guaranteed. Second, the healthcare system that is set up must be in tandem with tribal culture and values; it cannot simply be a format used in the world 'outside'. Last, but not the least, the tribals should be assisted in setting up healthcare systems within their communities so that they do not have to depend on big cities for their wellbeing. They have to follow the community-based model wherein women and youth are educated about critical healthcare areas, such as maternal and child health, neonatal health and common maladies such as malaria and diarrhoea.

PADMA SHRI DR. ABHAY BANG
Community Health Pioneer and Founder of SEARCH

Dr. Bang has revolutionised healthcare for the poorest people of India. He and his wife, Dr. Rani Bang, have pioneered a healthcare model that believes solutions must be developed in places where the problems are and not where facilities are. Their organisation, SEARCH, works with people in one hundred and fifty villages in Gadchiroli, one the most underdeveloped districts in Maharashtra, to provide healthcare, bring in development and conduct research.

The Bangs' most radical intervention — home-based newborn care (HBNC) has transformed the way infant mortality is approached in rural India. The model involves identifying one woman from each village and training her as a health worker, able to diagnose and treat common maladies, with a focus on neonatal health.

They introduced the model in thirty-nine of Gadchiroli's villages in the year 1995. In three years, neonatal mortality fell by sixty-two per cent. The breakthrough found global recognition after the world's best-known medical journal, Lancet, published a paper documenting it and, later, called it a Vintage Paper (articles presenting some of the greatest landmarks of medicine). In 2011, based on the Bangs' HBNC template, the National Rural Health Mission launched its nationwide ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) Programme that has reached out care to millions of newborns.

Only complicated cases can be referred to big hospitals.

Tribals must revive their ancient healing systems. The integrity of traditional healers can be seen in the fact that their services are not driven by money. It is based on humanitarianism. If someone is unwell and suffering, it is the duty of the healer to heal that person.

In Gadchiroli, the tribes use about two hundred and eighty kinds of trees and plants as healing herbs, medicines and spices. They name and personify trees on the basis of their properties. The arrival of allopathy has habituated our bodies to strong and quick relief; natural medicines have taken a backseat. Undoubtedly, modern medicines and treatments are more effective, but traditional healing systems score higher on availability, autonomy, cultural compatibility and cost.

I urge the tribals to register their natural medicinal practices so that they are not lost. They should be made available to scientists to test and approve so that non-tribal people can begin to use them.

However, the only source for natural herbs and natural medicines is depleting; we are losing our forests. The tribal healers have to wander far and wide to collect herbs. They also have to compete against ayurvedic medicine corporations, who harvest all available stocks. Also, tribal youth are not interested in traditional medicinal practices. They would rather take up lowly jobs in the city than seek traditional knowledge.

The Gond tribals I live among used not water but leaves to clean themselves after defecation. When the non-tribals began to ridicule them, ashamed, they started to use water after defecation like others do. But they did not know that a water cleanse required them to wash their hands with soap afterwards. This led to a diarrhoea epidemic; many died. The earlier practice was simple and a 'no-touch', hygienic method. Even the so-called modern people use toilet paper. The tribals were way ahead; they used a natural toilet paper. But, exposure to the outside world made them quit. They paid the price with their lives.

The world is a mechanical place. People are lonely and stressed. They suffer from mental illnesses like depression. Tribal life is community-based. They are closely knit and work together. They enjoy a great sense of belonging. The mood is usually upbeat. If nothing, there are always dances at night.

There are hundreds of healthy and happy tribal practices that are and can be used by people around the world; they can create a revolution in simplicity and sustainability.

The Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, wrote his civilisation manifesto titled Hind Swaraj (Indian Home Rule) in 1909. Scholars and thinkers criticised it as too idealistic, simplistic, naïve and old-fashioned. Much later, the Mahatma wrote, not in defence, but as an explanation, "My purpose is not to take people to the dark ages of the past but to teach the beauty of slowness and austerity in life."

That is how the tribal life is. Or it was.

"In Gadchiroli, the tribes use about two hundred and eighty kinds of trees and plants as healing herbs, medicines and spices. They name and personify trees on the basis of their properties. The arrival of allopathy has habituated our bodies to strong and quick relief; natural medicines have taken a backseat."


DELEGATE

KANI MODEL: SETTING A GLOBAL PRECEDENT

Earth is the only planet that supports life with nine million species. Biodiversity or bio-resources is the sum total of life on Earth — it covers microorganisms to mammoth animals. The UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) describes biodiversity as "the variability among all living organisms from all sources, including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species, and of ecosystems". CBD recognises the sovereign rights of nations over biological diversity. It binds its parties to respect, preserve and maintain Traditional Knowledge (TK). It stipulates fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from sustainable use of genetic resources and associated TK.

India has the distinction of being the first country in the world to experiment with a benefit-sharing model that implements Article 8(j) of CBD, in letter and spirit. I was the Director of the Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (JNTBGRI) in Kerala, between 1990 and 1999, when we were able to demonstrate that the indigenous knowledge systems merit support, recognition, and fair and adequate compensation.

The model, today, is known as the JNTBGRI model or Kani Model or Pushpangadan Model of benefit sharing. It relates to the sharing of benefits with a forest-dwelling tribal community from whom my team of scientists and I, as part of an All India Coordinated Research Project on Ethnobiology (AICRPE) of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC), Government of India, found a vital lead for developing a scientifically validated herbal drug (Jeevani).

During the course of an ethno-botanical exploration in the tribal hamlet of Kani, inhabiting the south-western ranges of Kerala, we came across, with the help of their unique knowledge, the medicinal use of unripe fruits of a lesser-known wild plant, *Trichopus zeylanicus* Gaertn. ssp. travancoricus (Bedd.) Burkill ex Narayanan (Arogyapacha), which they claimed has anti-fatigue properties. We went to the CSIR-Indian Institute of Integrative Medicine, Jammu, and carried out preliminary phytochemical and pharmacological assays and established the tribe's claim. We returned to JNTBGRI and developed a scientifically-validated and standardised herbal formulation with *Trichopus zeylanicus* as the major ingredient and *Withania somnifera* (ashwagandha), *Piper longum* (Indian long pepper), *Evolvulus alsinoides* (dwarf morning glory) and other ingredients.

After putting it through the mandated pharmacological, toxicological and clinical evaluation, which included an eight-month-long test on a hundred healthy and ailing individuals in different cities of India, we released the drug Jeevani for commercial use in 1996.

It is at this point we decided to share the benefits derived from this technology with the Kani tribe on a 1:1 basis. The tribe received fifty per cent of the licence fee and continues to receive the royalty at the rate of fifty per cent of what JNTBGRI receives from the pharmaceutical company that manufactures Jeevani. It took almost three years for the Kanis to receive the benefit. The delay was due to the inherent unavailability of a viable mechanism through which the Kanis could receive such a benefit.

Our prime concern in the beginning was to develop such a mechanism so that the Kanis could receive the funds and utilise it for the welfare of the community. We discussed several ways and finally decided on a trust fund. With the help of local NGOs and motivated IAS officials, we educated and encouraged the Kanis to register a trust.

The model was developed and perfected over a period of about twelve years (1987 to 1999), in full consultation with the Kanis. In fact, this process of benefit-sharing started much before CBD evolved. Today, the Kerala Kani Samudhaya Kshema Trust (KKSKT) is fully owned and managed by the tribe. Over seventy per cent of Kani families in Kerala are its members. As per the rules of the trust, the licence fee and recurring royalty stay in a fixed deposit, and the interest accrued from this amount is utilised for community development. In addition, JNTBGRI has trained Kani families in the cultivation of *Trichopus zeylanicus* in and around their dwellings in the forests. A large number of them are paid for supplying the plant's leaves to the manufacturer.

Looking back, it is hard to believe the transformation of these timid, nomadic forest-dwellers. They used to be

PADMA SHRI
PROFESSOR PALPU PUSHPANGADAN
Honorary Director General,
Amity Institute for Herbal and Biotech Products Development

Professor Pushpangadan, a world-renowned multidisciplinary scientist, has two hundred and thirty two patents to his credit, of which one hundred and twenty-six are internationally granted. He is the pioneer of Article 8(j) for the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. Under it, about two hundred member countries have pledged to respect, preserve and maintain the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous communities, promote their wider application and facilitate equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the use of biodiversity.

He was awarded the UN-Equator Initiative Prize at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in August 2002. The UNDP stated that he was awarded "for his work in developing a sustainable use of a wild plant and demonstrating a successful model of equitable benefit-sharing and recognising the Intellectual Property Rights of an indigenous Kani community''.

The Government of India awarded him the fourth highest civilian honour, the Padma Shri, in 2010.

scared of outsiders. Now they work with dignity and courage, and claim their rights and privileges. The quality of their life has improved tremendously. Many Kani boys and girls have passed school, and even graduated.

The trust has also been able to persuade the local authorities to build a motorable road of about fifteen to twenty kilometres in length, inside the forest, up to the building that was constructed by the Kani Trust.

The trust has acquired a fine twelve-seater vehicle for business purposes. A young Kani man, with a driving licence, plies it between their hamlets and the nearest village and town markets.

There is not a single case in the world so far where information from a tribe has been used to create a scientifically-validated commercialised product.

The fairness approach to community rights, Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) transfers, and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) related to genetic resources and traditional knowledge are what divides a developed country from a developing one. In bridging that divide, the Kani model is unique; the benefits accrued from the development of a product, based on an ethno-botanical lead, were shared with the holders of that traditional knowledge.

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TRIBAL HEALTH: AN OVERVIEW

The tribal people, who possess a huge bank of traditional medicinal knowledge, can be empowered under Article 8(j), as I have narrated. The Government of India, in fact, has formed the Ministry of AYUSH in 2014, ''to ensure the optimal development and propagation of AYUSH systems of healthcare'', the centuries-old alternative medicinal knowledge that India possesses.

The ministry wishes to harness this powerful knowledge, after due diligence, in the mainstream health systems, at the grassroots level, where the people with this knowledge live, where our government healthcare services do not reach.

The folk healers, after receiving 'formal' training, can become first responders to the health issues in the community, as they always have; the training can bolster their traditional knowledge with mainstream knowledge. However good the idea is, in the absence of its broad-based implementation, the health of tribal India remains at peril.

Tribals consider health a personal affair conditioned by culture; their concepts of diseases and treatments are as varied as their cultural panorama. They believe supernatural forces (benevolent and malevolent spirits) prevail in day-to-day life. While the benevolent ones protect and promote human destiny, if offended, malevolent spirits bring misery, epidemics and destruction that can only be warded off with magico-religious rituals and prayers.

The health of any society is intimately related to its value system, cultural traditions, socio-economic organisations and political set-up. In the case of the tribals too, it is an interplay of several forces — physical environment, nutritional habits, genetic diseases and disorders and health delivery systems. The general health of tribal communities resembles that of their rural and underprivileged brethren, except more of them are affected. They routinely suffer from malnutrition, anaemia, parasitic infections, diarrhoea and respiratory disorders that are caused by poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, absence of safe drinking water, unsanitary living conditions, and poor delivery of maternal, nutritional and child health services. The infections have become a part of their lives, so much so that their life expectancy is much lower (forty to fifty years) than the national average (seventy to seventy-five years).

A high frequency of communicable diseases are reported in tribal India.

• In Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Gujarat, goitre, yaws and guinea worm are endemic.

• Yaws is particularly common in Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tripura and Maharashtra.

• Tuberculosis, which tribals contract on contact with non-tribals, is widely prevalent in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Tripura.

• Leprosy is high among the Mikirs of Assam, and tribes in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Tripura and Lakshadweep.

• Malaria is widespread in most tribal areas. Forty per cent of India's cases occur among tribes.

• Cultural contacts with outside groups lead to sexually-transmitted diseases among the Andamanese, the Todas of the Nilgiris, the Khasas of the Jaunsar-Bawar region in Uttar Pradesh, the Khondhs of Odisha and a number of tribes in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Lakshadweep.

• Add to it genetic disorders that arise primarily due to high-frequency consanguinity. The most prevalent disorders are connected with the sickle-cell gene (Haemoglobin S). It has been investigated in over a hundred tribal groups. Except for a few notable exceptions, it is found in all tribes.

> "India has the distinction of being the first country in the world to experiment with a benefit-sharing model that implements Article 8(j) of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in letter and spirit. I was the Director of the Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute in Kerala, between 1990 and 1999, when we were able to demonstrate that the indigenous knowledge systems merit support, recognition and fair and adequate compensation."

A RIGHTFUL PLACE FOR TRADITIONAL HEALERS

Folk healers, now officially termed as Traditional Community Health Providers (TCHPs), have existed in all eras in India. Despite enjoying de facto credence among the rulers of the princely states, the gradual institutionalisation of health services post-independence has seen them being progressively marginalised in the policy landscape. This is especially true of tribal TCHPs who combat deeper socio-economic challenges. Given that most TCHPs are in their 50s and 60s, and their descendants are desisting from carrying forward their legacy, we are more likely than ever to witness their narratives becoming part of folklore in the decades to come.

The undisrupted social legitimacy of TCHPs proves that their tenets of practice find resonance in the cultural ethos of their communities. They are the torchbearers of Local Health Traditions (LHTs), who have inherited their knowledge orally and fortified it through years of practice under an elder or Guru. Given that Traditional Medicine (TM) has been defined by the WHO as "the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness", it would deem natural that TCHPs should have been accorded recognition as TM practitioners. However, the fact that India is one of the few countries in the world to have codified systems of traditional knowledge – AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, Swa-Rigpa and Homeopathy) – when TM is officially equated with them, it reduces the policy-level acceptance of TCHPs.

Though globally, in 1977, the World Health Assembly had called upon its member states to embrace indigenous health systems for a more inclusive approach to healthcare, it is only in the National AYUSH Policy of 2002 that for the very first time LHTs finds mention; it stresses the need for its revitalisation to improve primary healthcare. The National Rural Health Mission statement of 2005 also explicitly mentions revival of LHTs as a supplementary strategy to mainstream AYUSH. The WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy (2014-2023) exhorts member states to establish provisions for the education, qualification and accreditation of such practitioners, based on needs and risk assessment. Clause IX of the National Health Policy of 2017 builds upon the same calling for "developing mechanisms for certification of prior knowledge of TCHPs as well as creating opportunities for enhancing their skills". Thus, a narrow window of statute support has been opening up.

What would 'mainstreaming' TCHPs entail? What is the sort of legitimacy that would be befitting them? Notwithstanding arguments that there is a continuity between the folk health system and codified systems such as Ayurveda, TCHP practices in each agro-climatic zone are unique. Any process of mainstreaming should acknowledge this fact and ensure the integrity and independence of their service. Subsuming them under the larger ambit of AYUSH would progressively annihilate their distinctive character. A regulatory framework of district, state and national level councils could be established which would promote evidence generation through systematic documentation, skills upgradation of TCHPs and foster sustainable conservation of ecosystem-specific medicinal botanicals.

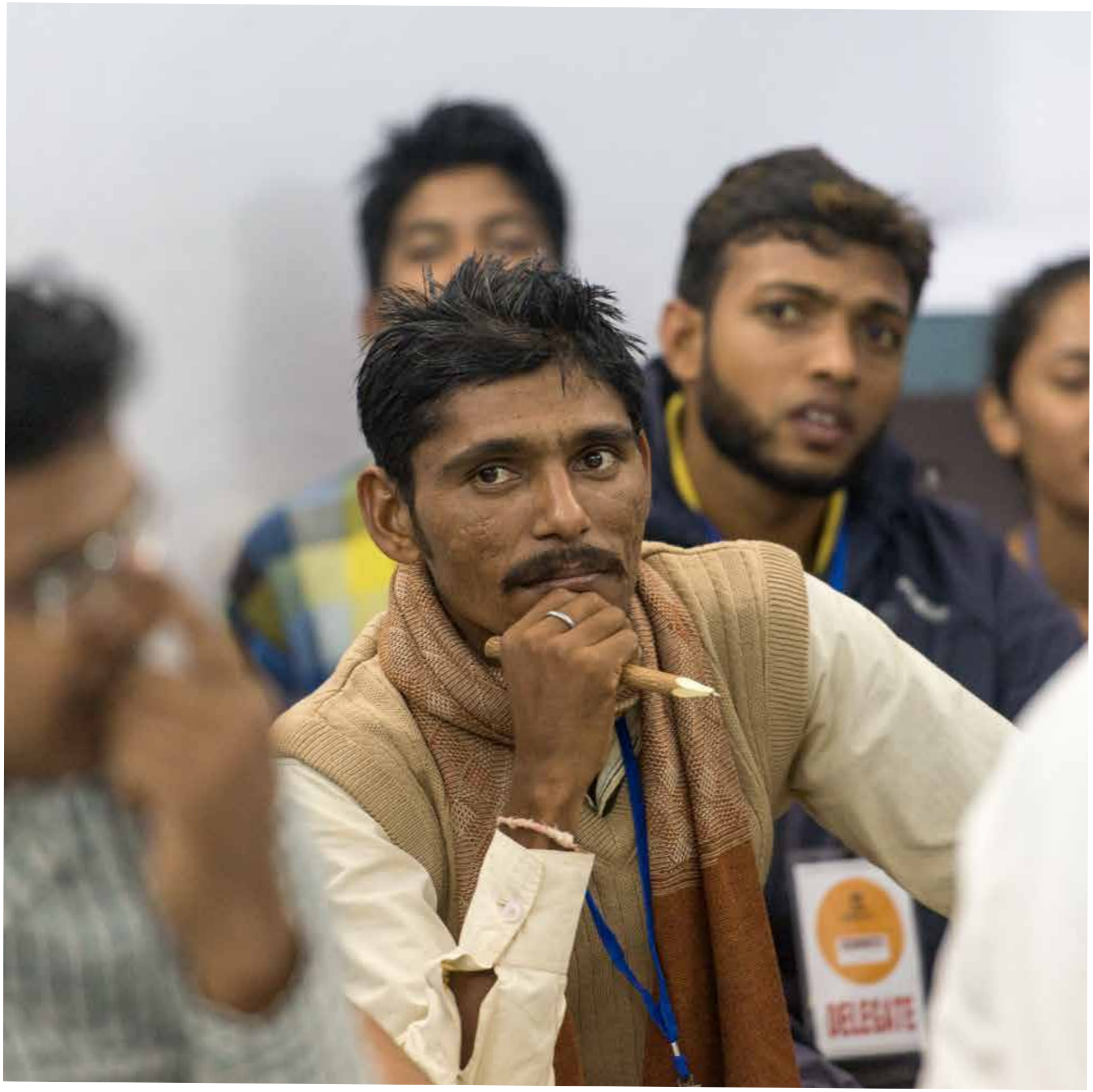
How will minimum quality, safety and efficacy of TCHPs as healthcare providers be ensured? A major step in this direction has been taken by the Bengaluru-based Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions along with the Quality Council of India – The Voluntary Certification Scheme for Traditional Community Health Providers in March 2017. Based on a standards competency model aligned with ISO 17024 and ISO 29990, it applies rigorous standards on the process of certifying and training TCHPs. Seven competency areas – Assessment and Diagnostics, Therapeutics, Professional Responsibilities, Communication, Health, Safety and Stream of Practice – are assessed for each applicant TCHP. Currently, the scheme is open to six streams – common ailments, jaundice, traditional bone setting, rheumatism, poisonous bites and traditional birth attendance. The programme seeks to demonstrate a credible model for assessment and capacity building.

The fact that existing institution-driven healthcare delivery model is unable to ensure last-mile connectivity calls upon policymakers to tap into the pool of TCHPs, albeit with requisite conditions and criteria. Self-reliance for healthcare at the community level is the only sustainable path to low-cost healthcare. A refusal to acknowledge so will only be at its own peril.

DR. N. S. SARIN
Public Health Researcher

Dr. Sarin spent the initial eight years of his career as an Ayurvedic physician employed in a full-time clinical role in a hospital setting at Coimbatore. He thereafter pursued his Masters in Public Health from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai and has been working as a public health researcher since. He considers himself to be 'a physician at heart with a research aptitude'. His broad area of interest in research is health policy, which particularly focuses on strengthening and mainstreaming AYUSH streams of medicine. He has been involved with the non-formal traditional healers' network and the efforts towards their competency-based skills assessment and certification through the national scheme of Voluntary Certification Scheme for Traditional Community Health Providers. He was awarded the TDU-Biomeriux Grant towards the implementation of the Training, Assessment and Certification of Traditional Community Health Practitioners in Karnataka.

(The author acknowledges that the ideas expressed in this article are not entirely his own and are reflective of a collective vision shared by the team members of the University of Trans-Disciplinary Health Sciences and Technology, Bengaluru. In particular, the author wishes to acknowledge his career association with Professor Darshan Shankar, Professor G. Hariramamurthi, Dr. Unnikrishnan P. M. and Dr. B. N. Prakash.)


DELEGATE

HOMELAND

FOR OUR LANGUAGE

A VOICE CAST ASIDE

Has the nation failed the adivasis? Has the nation left them behind?

To answer this question, it is important that we look at how indigenous communities in other countries are treated and compare our situation with theirs.

It would be interesting to know that among the continents of the world, Europe does not have any tribals, except those who may have migrated there since World War II. Germany, France, England and Spain have gypsy-nomads; nobody addresses them as tribals.

But, there are adivasis in Asia, tribals in Africa, indigenous people in Australia-New Zealand and the First Nation people in America. It is evident from this distribution that wherever there was colonial rule, some communities were classified as tribes.

In most continents, the colonial rule resulted in extreme marginalisation or complete annihilation of such communities. In Australia, New Zealand, Canada and America, we see the aboriginal tribes more or less wiped out. One finds them today as enfeebled communities, lost in the society of the settlers.

In contrast, in our country, the historical course has been quite different in terms of the conflict between the indigenous people and the colonial masters. The history and the contemporary situation of the adivasis in India can be more gainfully compared with that of the tribal communities in Africa. They played a fairly important role in the freedom struggle. Unfortunately, historians have not done justice to their struggle.

The idea of India as an inclusive nation is a result of the social composition of the Indian people; it is impossible to think of India as a nation without thinking of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. However, despite the vision for the adivasis enshrined in the Constitution, the legal and administrative provisions in force — their roots deep in the colonial era — continue to negate, in many visible and invisible ways, the due place that adivasis should have gained in Indian polity and society. This is not to say that the law is not updated. It is, but in its implementation there remains an impact of attitudes shaped during colonial times.

The land ownership given to the adivasis, through the Forest Rights Act to the Scheduled Tribes, has not entirely been transferred to them. The industrial corporations meant to provide capital for setting up tribal enterprises are kept running as inefficient units. Many corporates are eyeing their land and forests; the companies end up getting disproportionately better deals than the adivasis do. In some areas where big companies have established their electricity generation plants, coal mines or other businesses, the adivasis are treated as trespassers and criminals, even branded Maoists.

Adivasis are recognised as distinct communities by virtue of their distinct languages. It is one of the four defining features of a tribe, the three others being their shyness, remoteness and unique cultural traditions. Except for the late entrants, Santali and Bodo, none of their languages are placed in Schedule VIII of the Constitution that lists all official languages of India.

As a result of this multiple marginalisation, the adivasis migrate to cities in large numbers. In a way, they are desperately trying to find their place within the nation.

The situation of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) is the most pathetic. In 1871, some communities were listed by the colonists as 'criminal tribes'. They were interned, put to unpaid labour and restricted within especial settlements. In 1952, they were 'de'-notified. But they are still hounded out of cities and villages, mob-lynched, tortured and despised by the general society. Very little has been done by the nation for the DNTs.

One may say that the colonists divided the nation into two territorial parts, but they divided Indian society into several social segments. As tribal expert Professor Virginius Xaxa said, "We may have amazing rules and schemes for the adivasis, but the result is not there for us to see".

I would like to give yet another example. In the 19th Century, the country was introduced to printing. Some languages were printed, some were not. When the time of Independence neared, the nationalists pondered over the question of common languages for the country. It was decided that many languages that had developed scripts would be the languages of administrative use. There

PADMA SHRI DR. GANESH DEVY
Director, Bhasha Research and Publication Centre

Dr. Devy, a renowned literary critic and activist, is India's first English literary critic to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993 in the English language category for his book 'After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism'. The award is annually conferred on writers of the most outstanding books of literary merit published in any of the major Indian languages.

In 2010, Dr. Devy led the People's Linguistic Survey of India that researched and documented seven hundred and eighty living Indian languages. He is the founder-director of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara, which studies, documents and promotes marginalised languages.

The government of India awarded him the fourth highest civilian honour, the Padma Shri, in 2014 in recognition of his work with denotified and nomadic tribes and dying languages. He has also received the Gunther Sontheimer Award (1998) for his work on oral traditions, the SAARC Writers' Foundation Award (2000) for his work with denotified and nomadic tribes, the Prince Claus Award (2003) for his work on the conservation of tribal craft and the Linguapax Award of the UNESCO (2011) for language conservation. He returned the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2015 to highlight ''concern and anxiety over the shrinking space for free expression and growing intolerance towards difference of opinion''.

were fourteen languages to choose from and it was decided that education would be offered in those languages alone, and in English. Alas! In the earliest version of the list of languages in the VIIIth Schedule of the Constitution, none of the languages of the Scheduled Tribes were included. As a result, there was no way a college or a university could work in the medium of a tribal language.

Even schools in tribal languages were not considered initially. Until very recently, for the eight million tribal population of Gujarat, there was not even one special university. The situation in the other states has not been much better.

Ever so often, there are popular protests and agitations crying out for ending reservations in education and jobs given to the Scheduled Tribes. It is necessary to remember in this context what a past president of the United States had said, "Equal opportunity is a good idea for social justice; but among unequals, it is the worst form of terror."

The Indian nation has given much to the adivasis, but the nature of the giving is such that it easily translates into injustice. Language inequality is its most visible instance.

> Despite the vision for the adivasis enshrined in the Constitution, the legal and administrative provisions in force — their roots deep in the colonial era — continue to negate, in many visible and invisible ways, the due place that adivasis should have gained in Indian polity and society. This is not to say that the law is not updated. It is, but in its implementation there remains an impact of attitudes shaped during colonial times.

THE TONGUE OF THE RISING SUN

I am an old man sipping the breeze
that is forever young.
In my life I have lived many lives.
My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks,
In the transfer of symbols
I am the chance syllable that orders the world
Instructed with history and miracles.

~ Padma Shri Mamang Dai
Poet, Novelist and Journalist

Arunachal Pradesh, the Land of the Rising Sun, is the northeastern-most state of India. Home to the richest heterogeneity of indigenous people in the country, it boasts of extraordinary tribal authors. However, the best-known among them produce/have produced their works only in prominent regional languages, such as Assamese or mainstream Hindi and English. Very few write in indigenous languages. Even if they do, they prefer to use scripts based on Modified Roman Alphabets (MRA). Tribal literary societies, such as the Adi Agom Kebang, the Popii Sarmin Society, the Apatani Cultural and Literary Society and the Galo Language Development Committee, have, for most part, developed and adopted MRA to represent their unique phonemes. Additionally, new script developers try to ensure that their scripts (like Tani Lipi and Wancho) are used for creative writing, but the efficacy of their efforts is yet to be assessed.

The grim reality of language conservation and the anguish of regional writers have been expressed best by noted literary critic and scholar Tilottoma Misra, "The regional languages in India today seem to be fighting a losing battle everywhere in the country, and the future of creative literature in these languages hangs in the balance. The two Arunachali writers whose works had created a new tradition in Arunachali literature as well as in Asamiya literature, Lummar Dai and Yeshi Dorjee Thongchi, have become representatives of a tragic generation of creative writers whose works are no longer read by their own people because they are written in a language that is not 'useful' to the new generation. A writer's work does not cease to be defined by the region with which he/she is identified and which has shaped his/her sensibilities in the first place only because his/her chosen medium is not the mother tongue but an acquired language. At the same time, the acquired languages may create a distance between the writer and her world because there will always be native speakers of those languages who will claim that the languages were theirs before they were acquired by the others. For many writers, the decision to write in an acquired language is also based on the desire to target a readership which is wider than the limited one available in one's own native tongue."

Existing literary works in tribal languages face innumerable challenges of accurate translation into English and a scarcity of avenues for publication. Decreasing language competency among new-generation translators and cultural disconnectedness among younger readers intensify the problem, not just for indigenous writers but also indigenous scholars who are documenting oral literatures.

Languages of our tribals show layers of linguistic variety. The language essentially exists in three or more different forms depending on the context and the theme of usage.

For instance, in a Tani language like Galo, the Gomku Agom is the scholarly form, used in sayings, proverbs, rhapsody, folk songs, poetic and literary compositions and discourses by intellectuals. The knowledge available in it is limited to priests and veterans who possess great oratory skills.

Gomme Agom is the language of day-to-day conversations, hence easily available for study and conservation. However, the language of religion and rituals, Nyijik-Nyikok Agom, cannot be deciphered even by many elders; it is esoteric. This priestly language is regarded sacred and its knowledge is not passed on or institutionalised. The function of its chants are to invoke spirits and, therefore, the authority of its use is closely guarded. As a result, all oral narratives regarding creation, mythology, origin, migration, healing songs and dirges embedded in it, are available only to very few. Even when they gain access, native scholars are unable to translate the chants of the priests and shamans (referred to as Nyibos or Igus by different tribes) because each session of rituals takes up to two days and two nights, sometimes even longer.

There are several such small ethno-linguistic speech communities whose ways of life are not conducive to the

LISA LOMDAK
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Lisa Lomdak, a linguist, focuses her lens on community-based language development in conjunction with various tribal literary societies of Arunachal Pradesh. Her field studies and analyses facilitate the much-needed documentation of endangered indigenous languages and cultures.

Her ongoing PhD dwells on the Classifier Systems of Tani Languages of Arunachal Pradesh, spoken by over one million people. Tani refers to a cluster of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken among the Apatanis, Mishing, Nyishis, Nahs, Tagins, Galos and Adis, who live in the contiguous mountains of China and India (Assam and Arunachal Pradesh).

Lomdak has co-edited with Padma Shri Professor Ganesh Devy 'Peoples' Linguistic Survey of India, Languages of Arunachal (Volume IV, Part II)'.

She has also co-edited with Jumyir Basar and M. C. Behera 'Marginalised Identity: An Engagement with Art, Literature, Language and Ethnicity and Understanding the North East Region of India'.

standard processes of linguistic development and maintenance. Through extensive research and writing grammars, attempts are being made to conserve this centuries-old linguistic and literary treasures. While priority is given both to oral and written literature of yore, a written narrative can be recreated time and again, but if an ancient, unwritten language is lost, it is mighty impossible to recall it in its original form.

According to the recent study by Yater Nyokir (2018), titled Status and Challenges of Indigenous Creative Writers of Arunachal Pradesh, during the last century, specifically post-Independence, when Arunachal Pradesh was still a Union Territory called the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), literacy in mainstream languages among tribal people led to a resurgence of literary activities among the Adi; it witnessed the birth of a significant number of authors who chose to write in Assamese, English and Hindi. Many young tribal students started exploring the genres of drama, novel, poems and short stories. The Late Lummer Dai, Yeshi Dorjee Thongchi and Tagang Taki wrote short stories, fiction, poems and plays in Assamese to reach out to a readership beyond the state. Today we have indigenous writers in English like Oshong Ering, Mamang Dai and Yumlam Tana; they have received numerous awards. A few women writers have also made their valuable contribution in the field of Hindi literature.

However, it was not until the mid-80s that tribal intellectuals took the lead in preserving and developing indigenous language and literature. The milestone year was 1986, which saw the emergence of an indigenous faith movement among the Adis called the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang (the Donyi-Polo Faith), an animistic belief system of the Tani group. The Late Talom Rukbo founded it to revitalise Adi knowledge and culture and curtail the conversion-oriented incursions by mainstream religions.

Senior scholar Kaaling Borang, in his study, Religion and the Development of Language and Literature of the Tribes: Donyi Polo Yelam — A Case Study (2012), says the emergence of Donyi-Polo Yelam necessitated the collection, compilation and printing of books on faith, beliefs and hymns for the purpose of prayers. The process required rigorous efforts in finding and coining words for appropriate expressions. It resulted in the accumulation of a large number of vocabularies and volumes of written records containing the finest expressions in the form of poems, songs and prose. Borang also mentioned that the formation of the apex literary body, Adi Agom Kebang, on November 12, 1981, was very significant. Since it was supported by the elite of the Adi community, it could develop a mother tongue-based education.

Twenty-five years later, indigenous literature received another critical push. The formation of the Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society (APLS) in December 2006, in Itanagar, became instrumental in developing a favourable atmosphere for contemporary creative writers. It continues to organise literary sittings, awards and cultural gatherings. Along with the formation of APLS, various other tribal literary societies remain actively involved in developing culturally-rich textbooks. Their scholars publish novels, poems, short stories, essays, research and folklore.

Preserving our languages and literatures remain hard. But the perseverance of the preservationists is a great service to our civilisational, cultural and social identity, a great ray of hope.

> “Existing literary works in tribal languages face innumerable challenges of accurate translation into English and a scarcity of avenues for publication. Decreasing language competency among new-generation translators and cultural disconnectedness among younger readers intensify the problem, not just for indigenous writers but also indigenous scholars who are documenting oral literatures.”

I SPEAK, THEREFORE I AM

My meeting with Dr. Ganesh Devy — a literary scholar, cultural activist and linguist of great standing — inspired the idea of Dhol at the turn of the century. The only tribal periodical in the state of Gujarat, it is published in eleven indigenous languages and reaches out to about two thousand readers in each language.

Traditional tribal knowledge systems have not been available for exchange because of the sheer physical distances that separate one tribe from the other. Dhol is a platform for tribal intellectuals of Gujarat to share their wisdom and opinions with tribes in other states of India. Dhol is a successful template; it can be replicated elsewhere to create not only inter-tribal dialogues but also necessary conversations with non-tribal communities.

Language is the core of human identity; all forms of human expression derive themselves from language. The kind of education our institutions dispense follow a prescriptive and predictable written structure; there is no space for indigenous oral history and knowledge that contain in themselves the history of civilisations and the core tenet of tribalism — coexistence with nature and all its sentient beings. This antiquarian wisdom teaches us crucial lessons. Many tribals have forgotten tribalism; Dhol helps them rediscover their roots.

Dhol has emerged as an information bank of indigenous lifestyles, cultures, languages, knowledge systems and visual and performing arts. It has been able to promote the use of tribal languages in everyday interactions. It preserves the rich oral literatures and knowledge systems of tribes in written scripts. As tribals write in their own languages, it creates a new body of literature that can be part of the curricula in educational institutions. The absence of written literature till recently has contributed to a reductive notion of how important tribals are as a people.

If tribes lose their connection with their language and culture, they might end up like the Siddi tribe. Their dance, Siddi Dhamal, cannot be performed in its original form anymore. As they lost touch with their mother tongue, the original music, lyrics and expressions of this unique dance became extinct. This is a warning bell for all tribes: loss of language translates into loss of heritage and identity.

Tribals must be encouraged to write about themselves in the purest form. It is imperative because when researchers write about tribal life in another language, the essence of phrases, idioms and words is lost. Incorrect documentation is one of the worst forms of injustice. It is the responsibility of researchers to spend enough time with the tribes they are documenting.

While it is proposed that we create "language forests" and "language mountains" that will withstand the test of time, we must also create "language rivers" and "language lakes" that will let the richness of tribalism flow everywhere. This will only be possible if we can transmit to our future generations not just our languages but also our cultural, social and literary practices.

Tribes are willing to do just that. It became evident to us when we watched their response to the inaugural edition of Dhol (in Chaudhari language) in 2000 as we unveiled it in the middle of a dense forest at Padamdungari. They not only queued up in large numbers but also voluntarily paid ₹10 for a copy that they bought. We sold all seven hundred copies in less than an hour! All that remained was a basketful of crumpled and moist mud-stained currency — a metaphor for their blood, sweat, sighs and tears. It was then we knew in our hearts that our cause must be kept alive.

> "While it is proposed that we create language forests and language mountains that will stand the test of time, we must also create language rivers and language lakes that will let the richness of tribalism flow everywhere."

DR. VIKRAM CHAUDHARI
Chaudhari Tribe
Editor, Dhol Magazine

Dr. Chaudhari has dedicated his academic life to protect and preserve the folk literature, languages, culture, music, oral history and traditional knowledge systems of the roughly nine million tribals in the state of Gujarat.

He is the editor of Dhol, the first journal-cum-magazine in a tribal language in Gujarat. He is also the editor of Bol, the first magazine for tribal children.

Dr. Chaudhari is the recipient of the Birsa Munda Sanman (2016-2018) for his contribution to tribal culture and tribal children's literature.

He has also received the University Grants Commission Research Award (2014-2016) for his study of the languages of the Chaudhari, Dhodiya, Gamit, Kunkana, Kotvalia and Vasava sub-tribes of the Bhil tribe, who form nearly half of Gujarat's tribal population.

Dr. Chaudhari has also studied and recorded Nayaka, which is an extinct language as deemed by the UNESCO.

Currently, he is an Associate Professor with the P.R.B. Arts and P.G.R. Commerce College in Bardoli.

FARAWAY

MARRYING INDIGENOUSITY

Who would have thought that enrolling myself in a seemingly simple programme twenty years ago would change the course of my life and lead me on a journey unimaginable?

In 1998, Queensland Health, a state government body I was employed with as a health worker, was required to introduce Indigenous Cultural Awareness as a mandatory study for all of us who worked among indigenous Australians. As I sat through the sessions, I found that my knowledge of these communities was well short of adequate; at the same time, I found myself wanting to, more than ever before, be involved in working among them.

Soon, some of us were nominated as facilitators of the programme and put through a five-day training to become trainers. We were a group of four non-indigenous health workers and four indigenous workers. While everyone got along and a bond soon formed between us (one that continues till today), one of the indigenous guys, John Corowa, made a big impression on me. His friendliness and beaming smile made us feel welcome; his vulnerability and shyness fascinated me. I was often paired with John and we formed a strong connection. When the programme ended, we all returned to our respective lives.

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Two years later, I found myself working on yet another programme aimed at tackling the high number of smoking-related health issues affecting indigenous Australians. I was surprised to meet John in the project team. We worked closely together. John introduced me to many organisations and key people who gave me access to information and statistics that were essential to the completion of my project report.

These early interactions with the indigenous Australians gave me a better understanding of their lives. The issues included poor health outcomes, poor housing, limited education, remote access to services and an unacknowledged past of the traumas of colonisation, which had brought about a loss of culture, identity and language.

The impact on me, personally, was profound. I was called to understand what had happened, what was still happening and how I could support these communities to reclaim their rightful place in society. I recognised that as a non-indigenous person I had no right to 'push' ideas that I thought were best as they may not necessarily suit them. I needed to build trust with the community members, many of whom still suffered from the trauma and degradation of government policies of yore that had broken them, pushed them to the fringes, disrupted their sustainable lives, fractured their traditional economic and social systems, and then ostracised them. The wounds ran deep because the discrimination was vicious. They were not considered citizens of Australia until 1967. In fact, communities in Queensland could not own their own property until 1975. They continue to face systemic racism and associated violence even to this day.

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John and I became partners. We worked together with the people through various programmes, interactions and friendships. John, in particular, has spent the last twenty-five years advocating for improvement in health outcomes for his people. We attended reconciliation marches, cultural healing days, sports carnivals and music events where through information stalls, health-check stations and guest speakers, we single-mindedly pursued the idea of closing the gap that exists between the health statistics of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

One aspect that shines like a beacon for me, through all these years, is the ability of indigenous Australians to come together, share food, laughter, stories, songs and keep an open heart. They are peaceful, patient protesters who waited a long time for us to recognise their identity and pain.

Many indigenous Australians were forcibly displaced from their tribal lands by the colonisers. The first question they ask when they meet another indigenous person, "Where are you from? Who is your mob?" I love this! Nine times out of ten, they find a common denominator connecting them.

There is an organisation called Link Up that helps indigenous people find their families and communities,

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Indigenous Health Specialist

Pam is an Australian aboriginal health expert. She has served a long stint as heads of various projects of Queensland Health, a department of the government that operates and administers the public health system. She has also facilitated many indigenous cultural capability programmes.

Currently she runs 4M Enterprises, an overarching business incorporating John Corowa Music, Relax (a health and wellbeing studio), and Kahuna Bay Massage (a bodywork facility), at Hervey Bay.

especially the children of the 'Stolen Generations' who were forcibly taken from their families and 'placed' with white families or church-led institutions to assimilate them in the 'superior' Anglo-Australian culture.

The policy, which was in force between 1910 and 1970, did throw up a few success stories. However, a majority of 'placements' caused heartache and trauma that became intergenerational. Many indigenous children were taken overseas and for them the traditional link to their land broke. Some of them have returned as adults and, with the help of Link Up, reunited with their family and community. For others though, the reconnection is too late; their parents have died, their communities have scattered and there is nothing left to come back to.

A popular word amongst Indigenous Australians is 'deadly'. This word is used in a positive way and many health programmes use it in their titles. Deadly Choices is an initiative that empowers indigenous Australians to make healthy choices with regard to food and exercise and quit addictions. It also encourages people to access their local, community-organised health service and to complete an annual health check.

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In October 2017, John and I were talking about planning a trip to India, to Goa perhaps (although someone has since told us Goa is not India!) to do yoga and learn to cook traditional Indian meals. A few days later, out of the blue, John received a text message asking if he was free in November. There was an opportunity for him to attend Samvaad, a tribal conclave, organised by Tata Steel in Jamshedpur, India. We couldn't believe it! Of course, we needed more information, but our minds were already made up; we were going.

We fast-tracked our geographical knowledge of India, in particular, Kolkata and Jamshedpur. My visa arrived forty-eight hours before our departure; John's twenty-four hours before we were due to leave for the airport. We were on the verge of cancelling the trip, but it all worked out in the end. We were met at the airport in Kolkata and from then on chaperoned for the rest of the trip.

The opening night of Samvaad was an amazing experience. The colours, the costumes, the performances and the traditional welcome were so inspiring. We both realised that our knowledge of India and its tribal cultures was very limited and that we were in for a revelation. The cultural centre where most activities were held was an oasis of beautiful gardens, buildings with a spiritual feel, an outdoor auditorium that became a meeting place and a platform where tribal communities from India, Canada and Australia could discuss their issues and showcase their ethnicity.

What we listened to and what we participated in over the coming days and nights highlighted to us that tribal communities across India, in Africa, throughout Canada, the Americas and Australia are facing the same issues, displacement and a threat to 'tribalism'. They are all trying to preserve their culture, language, healing practices and identity in relation to their land and nature; they want their rightful place in the world.

The theme for the 2017 Samvaad, Leaders in the Making, brought together a plethora of young people who seemed more than ready to stand up to and deal with the challenges facing them, to gain knowledge, to propel their potential as leaders of tomorrow by peaceful means and to acknowledge the needs of other groups participating in this transformational journey.

The music and dance of all tribal groups present was a critical way of expressing who they are and where they come from. Their use of humour as a way of communicating, even though we couldn't understand the languages, was wonderful to see; it was DEADLY!

Since coming home to Australia, John and I have discussed organising a platform similar to Samvaad. We are envisioning an event that would bring young indigenous Australian leaders together on a single stage where they can propose their plans for the future. We see this as a way to ensure indigenous Australians are respectfully identified and have a meaningful and rightful place in Australia's future.

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John and I have a blended family. I have a son; John has two sons and a daughter. They are all grown up now and have their own children. We are grandparents to four granddaughters and two grandsons. John is from a large, close-knit family with brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and so many cousins. When we decided to be together, everyone welcomed me, although I suspect there were some who weren't sure about our relationship at first.

In those early days, one of the many things that struck me was that music is central to family gatherings. The guitars come out with every other instrument at hand and everyone sings happy, joyous songs.

Becoming part of John's family was easy for me. I felt comfortable meeting his extended family. I realised quickly that whomever we met from the indigenous community had some connection to John, no matter how distant. I am from a small family. When we get together with the Corowa relations, it's possible to feel swamped by so many people, such loud music and so much food. The food is something John and I still laugh about. I'm used to cooking small meals; John cooks for an army, just in case some people visit and we need to feed them.

All in all, John and I have a relationship that works and it has helped to build a bridge between two distinct family groups. This, I think, spreads to the wider community.

> "The wounds run deep because the discrimination was vicious. They (aboriginals) were not considered citizens of Australia until 1967. In fact, communities in Queensland could not own their own property until 1975. They continue to face a systemic racism and associated violence even to this day."

Photograph by Latika Nath

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Art replaces the light that is lost when the day fades, the moment passes, the effervescent extraordinary makes it quicksilver. Art tries to capture that which we know leaves us, as we move in and out of each other's lives, as we all must eventually leave this earth.

~ Elizabeth Alexander,
American Writer and Poet

The tribes of the Omo river valley run with death. They live in villages along the mighty Omo — their beings intertwined with its ebb and flow. When the river floods, she feeds their flood-recession crops, gives them fish and nourishes the grasslands for the cattle. Her dry spells bring scarcity and starvation to their hamlets that dot the dry savannas. This is Ethiopia, the southwest.

In as much as they contend with mortality, which is driven home by the development and political incursions of 'modern civilisation', the Omo people subliminally emulate their river and surge towards life. It is an ancient pattern of survival which traces the course of these waters that cut a nearly four hundred and seventy-five-mile swathe through the central highlands, finally emptying into the deep fissure that is the Jade Sea or Lake Turkana, on the Ethiopia-Kenya border.

The discovery of human remains dating back nearly two-and-a-half million years prompted the UNESCO to dub Lower Omo a World Heritage site in 1980. If Africa is humanity's womb, then the Omo valley is its umbilical cord.

Home to a population of two hundred thousand from eight different prehistoric tribes — Bodi, Kwegu, Mursi, Suri, Daasanach, Karo, Kwegu and Nyangato, the Omo valley is a marvel of evolution and civilisation. Nowhere else on the planet do so many genetically and linguistically diverse primordial people live in such a small area. It has been a crossroad for humans migrating in many directions, just shy of two millennia. Owning few items from the modern world, besides plastic jerry cans for carrying water, the Omo tribes are one of the world's last frontiers, by and large uninfluenced by the mainstream.

The week in 2017 that India's tribal summit Samvaad began, we flew from Nairobi to Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, and met our guide. From there it was a three-day drive, eight hours a day, to get to Kibish. The Upper Omo is remote and hard to navigate. It is not safe to photograph the tribes. They are a lot more aggressive than tribal groups in the Lower Omo valley, where, typically, the tourists gather. They carry fully loaded Automatic Kalashnikov 47s to guard their cattle from thieves and defend themselves in inter-tribal conflicts. The ancientness of fights to protect one's tribe and honour persists. The guns are a legacy of the Sudanese Civil War that bloodied the land just across the border for decades till an uneasy truce was reached in 2005. By then, the gun culture had permeated deep; there is no deterring violence in this oil-rich region. These images take my mind back to India, where we see the Maoist guerrilla guns scratch violent ridges through tribal, mineral-rich forests. The ongoing massacres in the Red Corridor are India's open, festering wounds. A river of blood runs through it.

The Omo river and her people are one; as life and death are one, as the river and the sea are one. They believe that the waters carry it all — joy, longing, good, evil. If you open yourself to it, it shall flow right through you. You stop seeking. You learn to receive. For that is when you shall find.

Because the river runs through them, the Omo paint themselves in the colours of the river. They gather her belongings to adorn themselves in her splendour. They sculpt their hair with animal fat and clay, wear jewellery of beads, bone and metal and paint their entire bodies with white minerals from the riverbeds, black charcoal, and red and yellow ochre. They scarify limbs and torsos to designate beauty, status and identity. These designs consist of small, raised scars created by rubbing charcoal in deliberately administered cuts, causing the skin to welt in intricate patterns.

They are human canvases, living masterpieces. The Karo are expert body painters; they use river clays and locally available vegetable pigments. Hamar women wear their hair in dense ringlets smeared with mud and clarified butter and topped off with headdresses of aluminium. The men mould extravagant ochre mud caps.

Perhaps the most daunting are the lip-plate Mursi. Pursuing a ritualistic art, linked with their idea of beauty,

SHLOKA NATH
Senior Programme Manager (Sustainability), Tata Trusts

Shloka Nath is Senior Programme Manager, Sustainability, at the Tata Trusts. In this role, Shloka helps lead the organisation's climate, energy and environment projects, implementing and funding sustainable and scalable solutions that help both people and nature. She has co-authored 'Hidden India: A Journey to Where the Wild Things Are'.

She is an active angel investor in social enterprises and has mentored organisations in skill development, financial inclusion, healthcare and sustainability. Shloka co-founded and was managing partner of Sankhya Women Impact Funds, the world's first women's investor funds that focus on early-stage enterprises impacting women.

Photograph by Latika Nath

women of the tribe have distinctive clay plates inserted into holes in their bottom lips. The bottom two teeth are removed before the hole is cut to insert wooden discs. Each disc is replaced for a bigger one until the lip is stretched enough for a clay plate. The larger the plate, the more cows the girl's father can demand in dowry when his daughter marries. No, they don't eat with the plates on.

The art of a people is often the only thing about them that withstands the tyranny of the ages. Long after the wars are over, the elders have died and the children have become men, art remains. Art is what helps us make sense of the world around us and our place in it. Art is how we tell our stories, where we came from and where we are going — the indelible, eternal expression of a people.

There is an image in my mind's eye, of a group of Suri women, in the beautiful, soft, early morning light in Africa. They assemble like forest fairies and nymphs, flowers draped delicately across their breasts, sprig adorning their hair, faces painted with ochre and white, streaked and dotted, fresh leaves and bark strewn across their shoulders, shoots and twigs between their teeth. They appear against the landscape like buds in springtime, woven into the forests around them, to the plains, to the mountains that ascend behind.

Genetic analysis suggests that 'modern humans' first evolved by the Omo river, one hundred and ninety-five thousand years ago. Every person that has walked the earth since then can be traced back to a single tribe who lived here. Some of these descendants left the Horn of Africa during a period of climate change and migrated across the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to Arabia and beyond, somewhere between sixty thousand and one hundred and twenty thousand years ago. Their genetic imprints course through the veins of the tribes of India as closely as their artistic imprints create prehistoric strokes on their bodies.

In Tamil Nadu, the Todas tattoo their hands and calves and shins with the same geometric patterns they use in their embroidery. Once married, the Singpho women of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh get both their legs tattooed from the knee to the ankle; men do the same with their hands. If you visit Ziro valley, you will still find old women from the Apatani tribe with intricate face tattoos and nose plugs. Women of the Kutia Kondh tribe of Odisha ink themselves with beautiful geometric facial tattoos. The Rabari women of Kutch use lamp soot with tannin from the bark of local trees to create the pigment for body art. Perhaps the most vivid example is that of the Konyaks of Nagaland, the last of the tattooed headhunters whose faces are stunningly intricate canvases.

Today, the Omo is an 'at-risk ecosystem'. Fatigue hangs in the heat. The savannas cry in thirst. The Ethiopian Government has recently completed the third of the five proposed dams upriver. The dams have curtailed the floods that feed the cultivations and the rich biodiversity. They have also affected the water levels of Lake Turkana, harming local fishing grounds. This has exacerbated inter-ethnic conflicts over access to water and grazing. Even worse, the government has leased large tracts of tribal land to foreign companies to build sugar and cotton plantations. Many tribes are being resettled. Cell phone towers are under construction. Younger members no longer want to wear lip plates.

Each step of the way, I despair. Displacement of tribes for minerals in their land, resources in their forests and hydropower related to their water bodies is common worldwide. The sustainable principles of their life and their sacred love for nature has little value.

On my last evening, the sun was hazy near the horizon. I lay down and stretched my legs on the banks of Omo.

Progress is inevitable. It is the way of the world. But the world cannot be whole without the indigenous peoples who are the source of our lives and arts. Their ways question the systems of our universe, force us to know ourselves deeper and our connections with the Earth better. They know and hence are more alive than the others.

The Omo, the Konyak, they reveal more to us about humanity in their intrinsic quest for beauty, no matter how dire the circumstances, how persistent the dreams of horror, the memories of death, the nights of waiting or how bereft they are of possessions.

We have this land, this Earth. We have each other. And, a river runs through us all.

> Genetic analysis suggests that 'modern humans' first evolved by the Omo river, one hundred and ninety-five thousand years ago. Every person that has walked the earth since then can be traced back to a single tribe who lived here... Their genetic imprints course through the veins of the tribes of India as closely as their artistic imprints create prehistoric strokes on their bodies.

LATIKA NATH
Photographer

Latika Nath is a conservation ecologist and photographer with a DPhil in Tiger Conservation and Management from the University of Oxford. She is the first woman wildlife biologist in India to work on tigers. Latika has spent over twenty-five years working at the grassroots level for tiger conservation.

She established the renowned Singinawa Jungle Lodge and through the Singinawa Foundation worked on education, health, art and alternate energy programmes for the tribal villages in the region. Her life and work have been featured on National Geographic television in a documentary called The Tiger Princess and on the Discovery Channel in the programme Wild Things. She has two photo books to her name, Hidden India: A Journey to Where the Wild Things Are and Ethiopia: Wildlife and Tribes of the Omo valley.

OTHER ROOMS,
OTHER VOICES

Human aspirations are sacred; they take peoples, societies, nations and civilisations forward. Ironically, the same aspirations led to the rise of militancy among minority groups. How can we not think about anyone else in our violent pursuit for what we think is right? We can't fight without taking the big picture into consideration. Violence may destroy us. We must trust that dialogues and conversations will lead us to a solution.

An example of such a solution is seen in the Bodo tribe that was engaged in a bloody battle for autonomy. Today, their youth movement has renounced violence and has found a new, reconciliatory energy. 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 turn violent and then they can be shot down. The Bodos have decided not to allow that to happen. The government will be forced to listen.

NIKETU IRALU
Angami Tribe, Nagaland
North East Peace Awardee and Rotary Peace Awardee
Gandhian Peace Activist and Naga Tribe Leader

We all know about the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, in which the British opened fire at unarmed civilians killing around one thousand people. But how many of us know that over one thousand and five hundred Bhil tribals fighting for India's freedom were killed by the British on November 17, 1913, atop Mangarh hills in Gujarat? The Mangarh Massacre is not a part of the national consciousness because British historians chose not to chronicle it. It only lives in our folklore.

In 2015, the Gujarat Government agreed to set up a tribal university and named it after Govind Guru, the leader of the struggle. After eleven years of research, I have finally written and published, Swami Govind Guru: Jeevan Ane Karya, about this forgotten piece of history. It is a part of the curriculum at the university.

ARJUNSHING LALUBHAI PARGI
Bhil Tribe, Gujarat
Author and Historian

I am a man of words. I grew up among many tribal groups and learnt their cultures and languages. They fascinated me. There are no good schools or colleges where I come from so I made do with what was available. The radio jockeys of Surat radio station helped me with tuition fees, clothes and books. My interactions with them piqued my interest in the media.

I record programmes at Surat and Vadodara All India Radio stations in tribal languages like Chaudhari, Vasava and Gamit. Print, radio and television have become effective vehicles to keep our languages alive and relevant.

I also write about inspirational tribal men and women to motivate youngsters.

VIMAL KUMAR CHAUDHARY
Chaudhari Tribe, Gujarat
Writer and Linguist

Our village lies along a forest. We were given rights to it under the Community Forest Rights Act. Custard apple grows in this jungle in abundance. We decided to sell the fruit in the bigger markets. The enterprise grew and encouraged our community. The very first year our turnover was ₹3,50,000. Now, on an average, the community government makes a profit of about ₹70,000. The forest gives us different kinds of produce every season. This has stemmed migration. Under the law, we have rights to 192 hectares of forestland which we have regenerated by planting one hundred and forty thousand trees so far.

The solutions to the problems we face can be found in our traditional ways of life. Jal-Jungle-Jameen (Water-Forests-Land) is the basis of it. Claiming our rights to these elements is the first step.

RAMLAL KALE
Korku Tribe, Maharashtra
Social Entrepreneur
Social Activations Mobiliser

I left my state, which has a sizeable indigenous population, to work with a tribe in another region. Why? Because we tribes are one people; our plight is the same.

I work to improve the deplorable living conditions that afflict the people of the Reang tribe. They fled from Mizoram to Tripura in 1997 following a violent ethnic persecution. Most of them still live in transit camps. The government has ordered them to return to Mizoram. However, the Reangs are terrified of a backlash. One of their biggest challenges is that they do not have jobs. We help them find employment. We are also creating a roadmap for their eventual return to Mizoram.

Leaving home has given me invaluable insights into tribal India. I urge all my tribal brothers and sisters to find experiences that will similarly broaden their worldview.

YADAGIRI KARTHIK
Yerukala Tribe, Telangana
Project Associate,
Sewa International Bharat

My tribe, Karmali, has sixty-four thousand people only. Four per cent are above sixty years of age. Eighty-one per cent are forty-five years and under. This demographic inequality has resulted in a loss of antiquity. It has been further undermined by the fact that our traditional wisdom and history remain unrecorded. As we move ahead to keep pace with the rest of the world, our culture is dying.

A few of us from college are recording the rituals, songs and dances that we perform on the occasions of birth, marriage and death. This work is important. We will slowly hand over the baton to the next batch of students.

VIBHANSHU KUMAR
Karmali Tribe, Jharkhand
MTech Student

My grandfather the Late Pandit Raghunath Murmu (1905-1982), more popularly known as Guru Gomke or the Great Teacher, had developed the Ol Chiki script for the Santali language, an Austroasiatic-Munda language spoken by the Santals. This empowered the language and it became one of the two tribal languages (the other being Bodo) to be recognised under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution that lists all the official languages of India. It is no mean feat considering India has hundreds of tribal languages and dialects.

We have been fighting to promote our language for decades. A lot has been achieved by the Santal stalwarts, but we have miles to go. It is sad that many members of our society are not ready to participate in the process. It is everyone's responsibility; we will have to keep pushing forward.

BHIMWAR MURMU
Santal Tribe, Jharkhand
Language and Culture Activist

Our village is in the remote mountains. We do not have access to electricity even today. The roads are pitiful; teachers have to leave their motorcycles at a certain point and walk for about 15 kilometres to reach the few schools we have. Most teachers choose not to put in the effort. Illiteracy and child labour are common.

I make short films using my mobile phone, and screen them for the community. These films mostly address the issues of child labour, education, sanitation and witchcraft. Film is a powerful medium. Small businesses in our area no longer hire children as labourers; they send them to school instead. Certain diseases were perceived to be the work of witches, like Sickle Cell Anaemia. I made a film and screened it, which made a huge difference.

RAKESH LALSING PAWARA
Bhil Tribe, Maharashtra
Filmmaker

Majuli, where I live, is the world's largest river island. The rains are heavy and the Brahmaputra river is in spate for six months. Floods disrupt life for weeks at a stretch. School buildings get inundated and businesses suffer. My organisation works towards quick restoration of classes after a deluge.

Most of our community members are uneducated. They don't find jobs. Our endeavour is to provide education and vocational training. We run skill-building workshops.

If we do not solve our own problems, no one else can. Social workers from outside our region come to help us, but real change must come from within.

RIJUMAI DOLEY
Mishing Tribe, Assam
Teacher,
Humming Bird School, Majuli

Our region is prone to natural disasters. Government agencies typically take time to reach the difficult terrains. The role of North East FoodBanking Network is critical. We act as the first responders.

With skill building and technology, farmers can increase productivity. So, we modernise farming and promote sustainable and organic agriculture practices that give higher yields.

We are searching for a long-term solution that will provide us larger donations and buffer stocks so that we can better tackle calamities.

I dream of a world where no one goes to bed hungry.

KHAMS ZOTAL
Zou Tribe, Manipur
Founder-Director,
North East FoodBanking Network, Chudachandrapur

Holistic development must include the voices of the oppressed and the poor. The developmental requirements of tribal India must be a part of fair governance. Laws must take into consideration the atrocities inflicted upon them.

Tribal communities have changed beyond recognition in the thirty-five years since I started fieldwork. Kondh areas are caught in the violence between Maoist insurgents and security forces.

We have to reverse the gaze and analyse the top and the bottom of the social structure. It will offer fresh insights for research and will help us better understand grassroots perceptions.

DR. FELIX PADEL
Advocate of Tribal and Village-Community Rights
Author, 'Sacrificing People: Invasions of a Tribal Landscape',
'Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel'
Anthropologist and Activist

Time is running out for the tribals. We are vanishing. I see three factors fuelling the crisis.

One, there is an acute lack of implementation of constitutional and human rights. Two, the model of development, which believes that factories and mines are the way forward, is deeply flawed. Three, when tribal systems merged with parliamentary democracy, we did not understand what it entailed. As a result, we are still manipulated. We sell our votes for alcohol, money and clothes. We do not know how to choose competent and honest leaders.

One of the key enablers of empowerment is education. For that, availability of education in our mother tongues is imperative. We also require better representation in all the pillars of democracy – Judiciary, Executive, Legislature and Media. If all of humanity does not take steps to save the tribals, nature and humanity will be lost, and, believe me, the world will be lost.

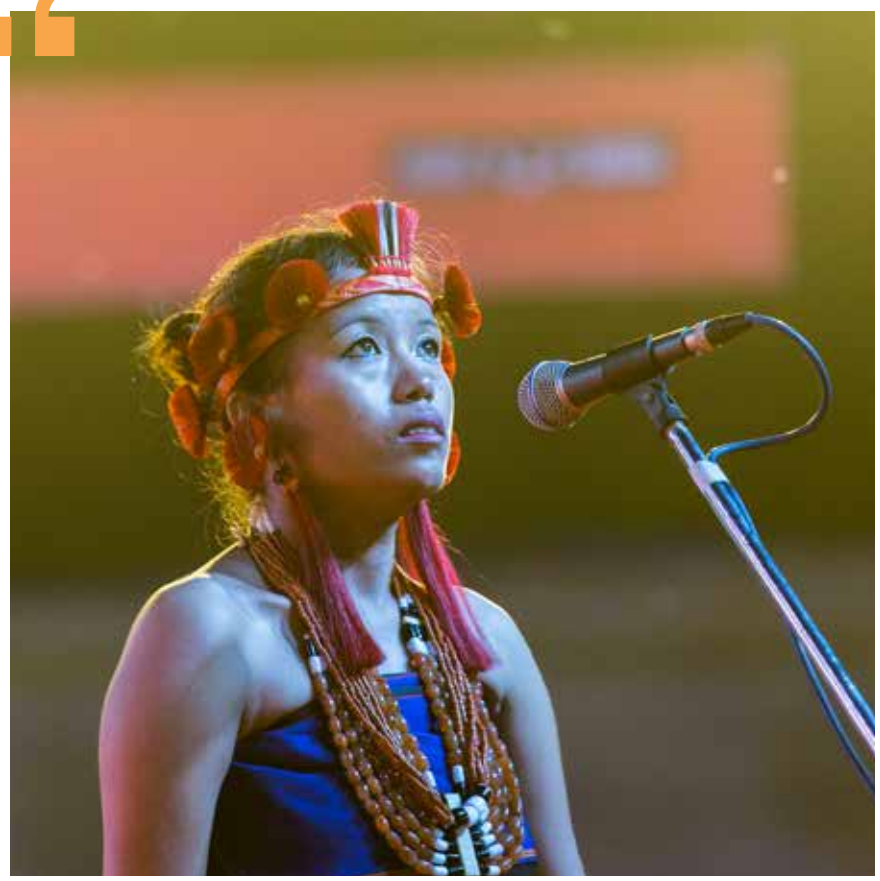
SALKHAN MURMU
Santal Tribe, Jharkhand
Santali Bhasha Morcha Activist

Tribal India accounts for about eight per cent of India's population. Logically, it should receive at least eight per cent of the Union budget. It receives less than three per cent. On the other hand, in certain states, the allocation for family planning measures targeting tribals is as high as twenty per cent. Is this the only area in which tribals need help?

If the government decides to right the wrongs and empower tribals, its idea of development should be in agreement with their opinions, traditions and customs.

Before a project begins in a village, every single villager must agree to participate and contribute her/his labour. It will make them agents of their own transformation.

JOE MADIATH
Toilet Man of India
Founder, Gram Vikas, Odisha
Social Entrepreneur



We work to build greater awareness about disabled people and secure for them better public facilities, like walking ramps, support bars, separate toilets, wheelchair and crutch-friendly elevators and low-floor entry doors in buses and trains.

We don't want society to sympathise with us. We do not regret our disabilities. We don't want people to be hurtful. We don't want them to marginalise us.

Disabled people in our communities are not encouraged to participate in social occasions. We are considered inauspicious. See us, hear us and understand we too want love, marriage, relationships and children.

ASHE KIBA
Sumi Tribe, Nagaland
Member, State Disability Forum

I work to conserve my language Wancho, a tongue spoken only by about fifty thousand people. It is one of many Tibeto-Burmese languages; not one has a script. Existing scripts cannot cover the range of sounds in Wancho. This has made our oral literature vulnerable.

I have worked for eleven years to develop a script. It is an original work, not a modification derived from antiquity, although the ethos is indigenous. We have a Wancho language primer in place and we are going to introduce it in three government schools. We want the youth to learn and draw from other cultures. At the same time, we must recall, record and practice our own.

BANGWAN LOSU
Wancho Tribe, Arunachal Pradesh
Founder,
Wancho Literary Mission

When I was six years old, I was sent away from my village to receive better education in the city. I only read and spoke Santali. Away from home, I struggled with Hindi and English, which were the medium of instruction and conversation. I adapted to the new languages, but every time I visited home, I realised I was forgetting Santali.

We cannot survive in the contemporary world with one language, yet learning new languages does not have to be at the cost of our mother tongue. I consciously decided to learn all three languages with fair proficiency.

We must use our first language whenever we can, even if we live in cosmopolitan areas. There is no shame in speaking our tongue. If we don't, we will lose our traditions, our culture and our essence as tribals.

DR. IVY IMOGENE HANSDAK
Santal Tribe, Jharkhand
Associate Professor of English,
Jamia Milia University, Delhi

Education was not easy to come by where I come from. Lack of education deprives us of our rights. So, I founded five schools in our locality.
When the government finally set up formal schools, I decided to work on livelihoods.

In 2005, when the MNREGA (an employment guarantee scheme that offers jobs of constructing public amenities to rural Indians) was introduced, we found that the officials were misappropriating funds. We protested and pressurised the officials to give village workers their due.

We have founded Vayam, an organisation that creates awareness about government schemes and legal provisions. Some day, we will learn to use these provisions to establish self-rule or Swaraj.

VINAYAK THALKAR
Warli Tribe, Maharashtra
Forests and MNREGA Activist

Child Marriage is widely practiced in our community. I too am a victim. I was married off when I was really young; I don't remember any of it. When I became an adolescent, I was not allowed to befriend boys my age; my family feared that I would get into relationships. My husband made it difficult for me to lead a normal life. He treated me like his property. I had no friends my age because I was married and they couldn't relate to me. Meanwhile, my husband remarried, but he refused to let me go. I filed for a separation through the Women's Welfare Organisation. Today, I am free.

I work to promote progressive ideas in my community. They actually do not interfere with our traditional identity. The process is not easy; there is stigma attached to new paradigms. People call me 'characterless', but I carry on because this transition is important.

MENGO RYAN
Nishi Tribe,
East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh
President, Naga Student Union

Jharkhand is the most mineral-rich state of India. It also has a significant indigenous population. As we became industrialised, more and more people from other parts of India migrated and settled in our cities and towns. It upset the demographics. In 1951, tribals were two-thirds of the population. Now we are barely one-fourth, pushed out of 'developed' areas, rendered landless and pitted for opportunities against people who have barely lived here a few decades.

We are fighting for fairness in the Domicile Policy (which will give us priority in government jobs, land rights and educational opportunities), accessible healthcare, quality education and livelihoods. Without these, we will remain poor and powerless. Let's keep the social revolution alive.

DEEPA MINZ
Oraon Tribe, Jharkhand
Tribal Rights Activist
Chairperson, Jharkhand
Bachao Andolan Manch

I work to conserve the Karbi performing arts through research, recordings and live performances of folk songs, music and dance. Folktales and folklores are the only records of early Karbi history. The Karbis also have a unique version of The Ramayana (Sabin Alun), which is entirely unwritten and handed down the generations orally.

Swept up in modernisation, we are forgetting our roots. We are taking the easy road which leads us away from our uniqueness.

Songs and dances are an integral part of our lives. We must keep them alive, as they keep us alive.

DILIP KATHAR
Karbi Tribe, Assam
Principal,
Karbi Traditional Music Culture
and Research Institute, Assam

In the early 2000s, I was in Delhi for treatment when I noticed the huge number of poor tribal girls from Jharkhand who land up as domestic workers in the capital. Their working conditions broke my heart. More often than not, the employers did not allow them to have meals on time or get enough sleep. In the name of food they were given leftovers. They weren't allowed leave or leisure. In some cases the employers sexually abused them, and, in rare cases, even sold them. Many other girls turned up in tourism destinations as housekeepers and masseuse and faced worse situations.

I returned to Ranchi and with the help of my colleagues started the Jharkhand Domestic Workers Welfare Trust. We help these girls return and then place them in evaluated homes and businesses in our cities. We have a strict monitoring system to safeguard their security and rights. We have pushed the state government to peg the minimum wage at ₹6,300 per month as of today. This has not only stemmed their forced migration and related abuse but also addressed the financial helplessness of poor tribal families.

SISTER JEMMA TOPPO
Oraon Tribe, Chhattisgarh
Coordinator, Jharkhand Domestic Workers Welfare Trust

When India became independent, the Constitution secured economic, political and social rights for the tribals. But subsequent five-year economic plans saw but one per cent allocation of funds for tribal development. To bridge the gap, in 1975 the government allocated funds to each tribe based on their population. However, a single tribe may reside in various pockets of contiguous states. So, the states of Odisha and Jharkhand, with tribal populations between twenty two per cent and twenty six per cent, were barely allocated five per cent to six per cent funds.

We are displaced and marginalised by big industries, dams and large-scale mines. We languish without education, employment or opportunities for a better life. Even the laws that are supposed to protect us are ambiguous in practice. For example, the Forest Rights Act secures tribal habitats and livelihoods. However, the government alleges that it interferes with the state's right to development on the same lands.

PROFESSOR VIRGINIUS XAXA
Oraon Tribe, Chhattisgarh
Chairman, Xaxa Committee:
Revealing the Socio-Economic Status of Tribals

Growing up, we were very poor. Women in our village had to go to the forest to gather firewood. It was very unsafe; many of us were attacked and molested. I decided we will not remain helpless and downtrodden.

With a small loan, against the wishes of the community, I started an organic compost farm. Slowly other village women joined in. Today we run a profitable and sustainable farming enterprise. We produce and sell neem oil, organic fruits and vegetables, readymade garments, milk and milk products. We address issues related to community health, hygiene, savings, credit, and income generation. We have set up a school for poor children and hired trained teachers to run and manage it. It has a daycare centre too.

I appeal to each one of my tribal brothers and sisters to take up one big issue and work towards its resolution. It will lead us to a better future.

HIRABAI LOBI
Siddi Tribe, Junagadh District, Gujarat
Winner of the Jankidevi Bajaj Puraskar, 2016,
for Promoting Rural Entrepreneurship

I work to re-establish harmony among Bodos, other local tribes and Muslims in the state of Assam. Their relations had begun to break down in the 1990s leading to the bloody riots of 2012 in which thousands were displaced. The prime issue was that the tribals perceived a threat to opportunities and land rights as the number of migrants increased.

We use non-traditional interventions such as sports, cultural exchanges and classes in which Bodos, other tribes and Muslims learn each other's languages.

We believe peace is impossible without empathy and incomplete without justice.

KANSAI BRAHMA
Bodo Tribe, Assam
Programme Officer,
Criminal Justice Programme,
Kokrajhar

The culture of any community needs protection, promotion and preservation. The repository of our values and principles guide us through life. It gives us identity and a sense of community.

I work to preserve the Lepcha culture because it connects us to our roots. I have modernised the traditional dress so that young women can wear it every day. I wear my Lepcha identity with pride. I wear my Indian identity with pride.

Those who call me Japanese and Chinese, correct yourselves. I live here. I always have. This country belongs as much to me as to you.

PREMULLA LEPCHA
Lepcha Tribe, Manipur
Entrepreneur
Volunteer, Sikkim
Lepcha Youth Association

Tribal rituals and belief systems are connected to nature. Living as part of nature, our ancestors created these traditions.

My village lies in a hilly area. During the pre-monsoon months, discerning the patterns of the fog around the peaks, our elders could predict if it would rain and for how long. While clearing out forest areas for agriculture, our ancestors left critical patches of biodiversity intact. During harvest festivals, we prayed not only for the wellbeing of people but the entire ecosystem.

This relationship with nature and respect for its power was our way of life; it made our lifestyle sustainable. These are practices that we must keep alive.

DEVENDRA CHAMPIA
Ho Tribe, Jharkhand
Politician

In a tribal community in the Nilgiris in Kerala, the traditional houses were constructed close to each other. In some ways they were interconnected. When the government relocated the tribe, it gave them concrete houses that were built as individual units. It destroyed the tribe's interdependence. Earlier, when a family hosted a guest, the community members joined in. Living in the new houses, nobody knew when guests arrived or left. They were hunter-gatherers. The government decided to give them free food grains. So, they also lost their culture of considering food as a community resource.

When the government sets out to 'develop' a tribe, it must use a holistic approach. The development must be social, educational, financial and political. It should not obliterate culture and identity.

DR. VADIVELU GNANSUNDARAM
Linguist (Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages), Central Institute of Indian Languages

Our forests are shrinking at an alarming rate. If forests die, so will we. I appeal to tribal India to unite and protect the life-blood of our planet. We are the most well placed to do so because we live in and around all of India's forestlands.

Some people of our tribe indiscriminately felled trees because they were ignorant. However most of us are attached to nature and associate it with divinity; we replenish it by planting trees.

We must co-opt students in this mission. If each one plants one, the crisis will wane.

In pursuing this critical objective, let's remember what American President John F. Kennedy said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country'.

PADMA SHRI JADAV PAYENG
Mishing Tribe, Assam
Forest Man of India
Regenerated a 1,360-acre forest in the ecologically sensitive Majuli Islands

Lack of education, loss of culture and loss of livelihoods are our biggest challenges. My community has a unique tradition called Jingrwai Lawbei. When a child is born, the mother composes a musical name for her/him. This becomes the identity of that person. The enthusiasm around the practice is waning. I left a government job and returned home to conserve Jingrwai Lawbei.

We want mainstream education, of course, but we want our linguistic and literary traditions to be part of our curricula, so that they survive in everyday life.

ROTHELL KHONGSIT
Khasi Tribe, Meghalaya
Cultural Conservationist
Vice Chairman,
Indigenous Agro Tourism Cooperative

I document the bardic and oral literature of the Pardhans, who are viewed as a sub-group of the Gonds. Our socio-linguistic group does not get due attention as conservationists mostly concentrate on saving Gondi, the more prominent of the two groups.

As part of my PhD, I document my tribe's literature which dates back hundreds of years and is largely oral. After all who are we without our culture and literature, and who would we be without them?

SANGEETA SHYAM
Pardhan Tribe, Madhya Pradesh
PhD Fellow,
Indira Gandhi National
Tribal University, Amarkantak

RHYTHM IN OUR BLOOD

(Text compiled from various sources)

SIDDI DHAMAAL

The Dhamaal dance of the Siddis remains one of the few existing cultural practices that harkens back to their roots in Africa. Elaborate body painting and tattoos play a significant role in this spectacle. The dance is a celebration of a successful hunting expedition. The dancers exhibit immense physical stamina; furious drumming is matched by acrobatic jumps, pushups and fierce facial expressions.

About the tribe: Descending from the Bantu people of the East African Great Lakes region, the Siddis were transported to India via the Arab (7th Century) and Portuguese (17th Century) slave trade. A reclusive people, most of them live in hamlets in and around the Gir forest of Gujarat and the hilly jungles of north Karnataka. Most labour on farms and are adherents of Sufism. Living in poverty, with their language and other cultural traditions lost, dance and music provide the Siddis the last tenuous link to their origins.

SARFA

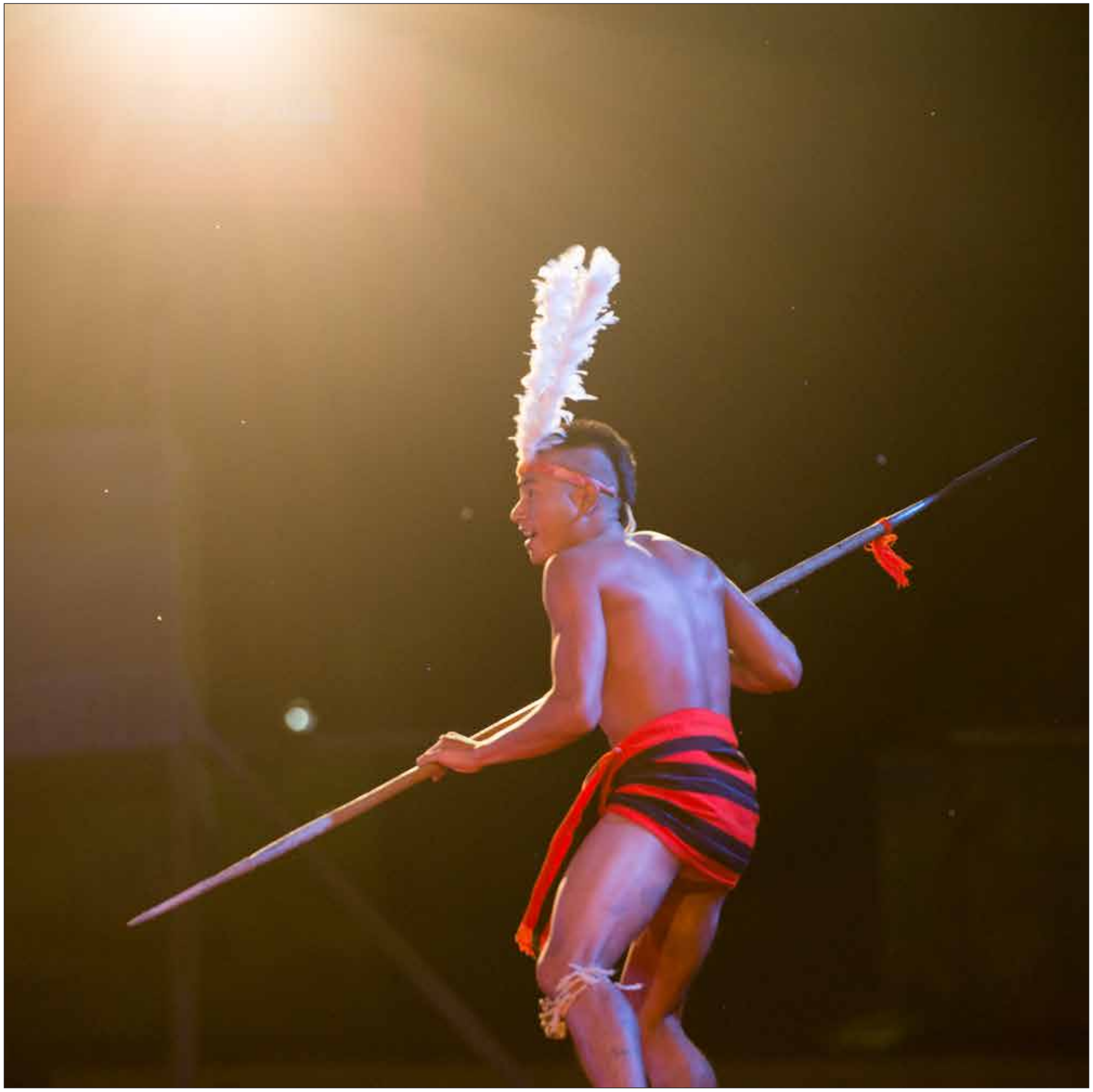
The Santal tribes of Eastern India perform the Sarfa to honour the strength of cattle. On Amavasya (new moon) nights in the month of Ashwin (September-October), women balancing decorated pots on their heads, sing and dance as they play the Sarfa (a wooden instrument).

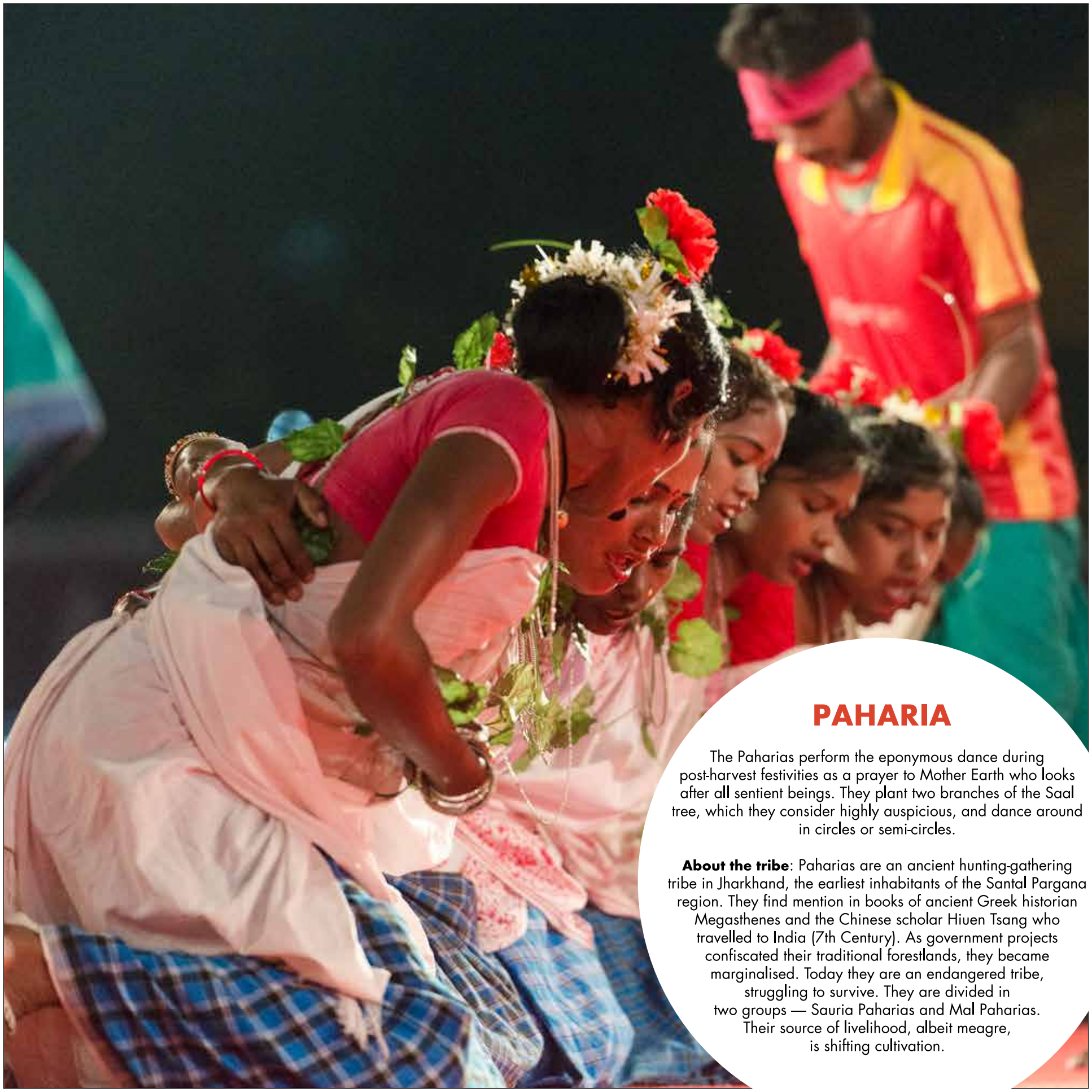
About the tribe: The third largest tribal group of India, Santal history, culture and language (Santali) are well documented unlike that of other Indian tribes. They are scattered across West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand and Assam. The life of the Santals, many of whom are farmers or cattle-herders, is closely tied to their land, livestock and their supreme deity Marang Buru or Bonga (a nature God). Renowned for their sense of collective pride and justice, 10,000 of them had risen up against the unjust economic and social policies of the British and the feudal lords in 1855 (Santal Rebellion).

RAJYOT PHEICHAK

The traditional folk dance of the Tangkhul Naga tribe is Pheichak. Three of its variations — Luivatyot, Shomkhapyot and Luirayot — are associated with agricultural festivals. The fourth variation Rajyot is a war dance that used to be performed before and after battles. The commander stands at the centre with a spear in his hand; his headgear or pasis is decked with flowers to signify his status. The dancers follow his lead.

About the tribe: It is said that the Tangkhul Naga people originally came from Myanmar to India via the Yunan province of China. The exodus of the tribe, in successive waves between the 9th Century BC and the 11th Century, is a testament to their fortitude given the ruggedness of the migratory terrain. Descendants of headhunting warriors and animists, they live in the remote hills of Ukhrul in Manipur. Their most prominent language is Hunphun and their cultural and historical traditions remain primarily oral.





PAHARIA

The Paharias perform the eponymous dance during post-harvest festivities as a prayer to Mother Earth who looks after all sentient beings. They plant two branches of the Saal tree, which they consider highly auspicious, and dance around in circles or semi-circles.

About the tribe: Paharias are an ancient hunting-gathering tribe in Jharkhand, the earliest inhabitants of the Santal Pargana region. They find mention in books of ancient Greek historian Megasthenes and the Chinese scholar Hiuen Tsang who travelled to India (7th Century). As government projects confiscated their traditional forestlands, they became marginalised. Today they are an endangered tribe, struggling to survive. They are divided in two groups — Sauria Paharias and Mal Paharias. Their source of livelihood, albeit meagre, is shifting cultivation.

LOSAR SHONA CHUKSAM

Losar Shona Chuksam of the Kinnaur tribe is a series of slow movements depicting agricultural activities. This dance has a sacred significance; it is performed in the months of April and May (during their new year). The knees of the dancers move in the same manner as the knees of farmers while sowing seeds. There are no songs; they dance to the rhythm of various percussion instruments.

About the tribe: Kinnauras, Kinnara, Kanawara or Kannaura — the Kinnaur tribe, known by many names, lives surrounded by the snow-capped Dhauladhar Mountain Range in Himachal Pradesh. Kinnaurs were respected fighters and philosophers. Kalidasa (4th Century to 5th Century), the great Sanskrit poet and dramatist, indicated their valour in epic poems Meghaduta and Raghuvamsha. Kinnaurs have a limited interaction with the outside world. Kinnauri is a Sino-Tibetan dialect. They are Buddhists.

FALGUN HALKA

When the bright red Saal flower blossoms in spring, the Kharias of Jharkhand perform the Falgun Halka as a part of the festival of Sahrul. Bearing flowering branches, men from the villages march in procession, offering blossoms to passersby. They pile up the branches at the community centre, concoct and drink a local brew and dance. With interlocked hands, they sway to the music of flutes and beats of a drum called mandar as they offer prayers to Nature.

About the tribe: Once tea plantation workers, Kharias live in the Ranchi, Gumla, Singhbhum and Hazaribag districts of Jharkhand. They speak Kharia, which belongs to the Munda subgroup of the Austroasiatic languages. They are divided into three subgroups — Hill Kharia, Delki Kharia and the Dudh Kharia. They are animists and worship the Sun God. Many Kharias have become farmers. They grow rice and millets using shifting cultivation.

PAIKA

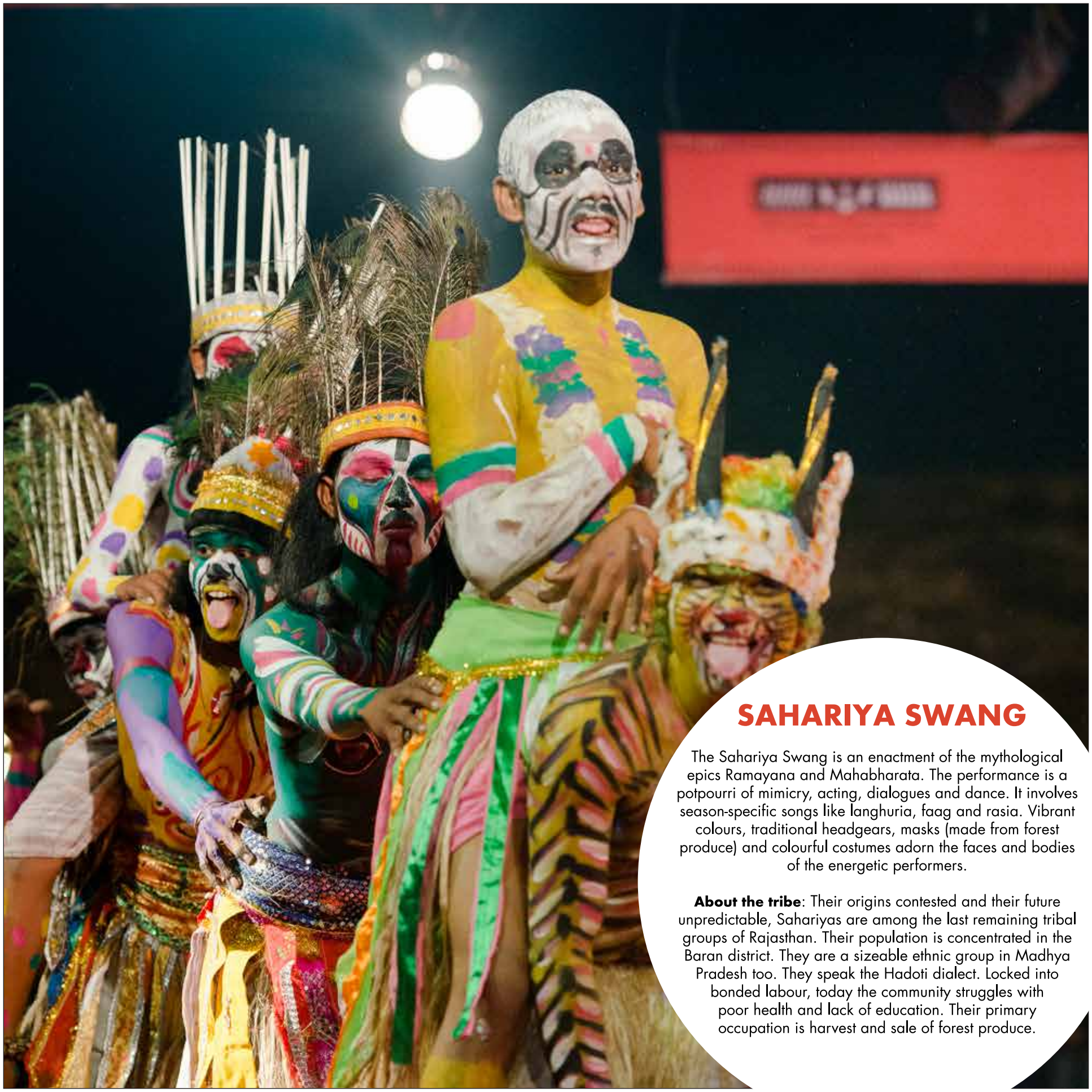
The Paika dance of the Munda tribe is a stylised performance that symbolises preparations and readiness for battle. The dancers showcase their deftness with swords and shields to the beats of traditional drums and trumpets. Once a martial art and a dance form, the mock combat of the Paika is an ode to ancient wars won and lost.

About the tribe: Paikas were the organised peasant militia of the Mundas (the largest tribe in India) who soldiered for kings in the pre-British era. Native to the states of Odisha and Jharkhand, they organised akhadas (community gather) to keep their infantry fit. Mundas were among the first tribal communities to resist colonisation. In 1817, Paika commander Jagabandhu Rai led the legendary Paika Rebellion against the British, dealing them significant losses. They are farmers and forest gatherers and follow Hinduism and Sarnaism (Religion of the Sacred Grove).

CHERAW

Historians believe that the ancient dance form of Cheraw was developed in the Yunan province in China in the 1st Century. It arrived in India with the Tibeto-Mongoloid migrations in the 13th Century. The female dancers step in and out of intersecting bamboo staves on the ground that male dancers move to the beats of drums and gongs. While the dance movements appear spontaneous, they require rigorous practice to arrive at perfect synchronisation.

About the tribe: Traditional historians say that the Zo are a Tibeto-Mongoloid group of people. Another arm of research proposes that they are one of the 10 tribes of Israel who were 'lost' after the Assyrians conquered and plundered the Northern Kingdom of Israel around 722 BC. Pre-colonised Zos were animists. A majority of them are now Christians. Since the late 20th Century, some families practice Judaism.



SAHARIYA SWANG

The Sahariya Swang is an enactment of the mythological epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. The performance is a potpourri of mimicry, acting, dialogues and dance. It involves season-specific songs like langhuria, faag and rasia. Vibrant colours, traditional headgears, masks (made from forest produce) and colourful costumes adorn the faces and bodies of the energetic performers.

About the tribe: Their origins contested and their future unpredictable, Sahariyas are among the last remaining tribal groups of Rajasthan. Their population is concentrated in the Baran district. They are a sizeable ethnic group in Madhya Pradesh too. They speak the Hadoti dialect. Locked into bonded labour, today the community struggles with poor health and lack of education. Their primary occupation is harvest and sale of forest produce.

VATTAKALI

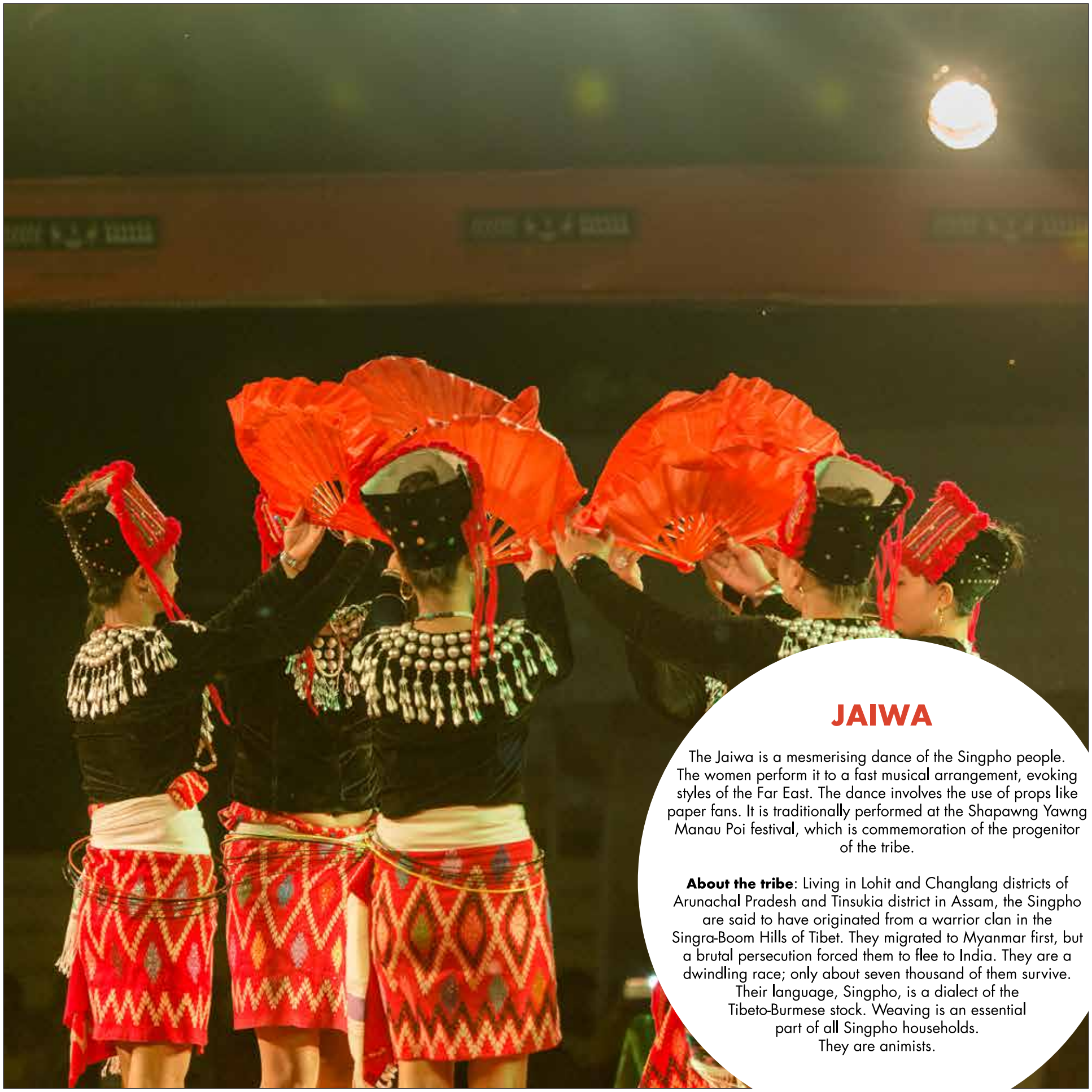
The Vattakali dance of the Paniyas of Kerala details their agrarian activities, like the rice-cropping cycle. A troupe of percussionists perform the song to extremely catchy tunes. The dancers move in various formations as the men play small drums and the women dance with farm items as props. This dance is integral to weddings and community festivities.

About the tribe: The largest indigenous group in Kerala, Paniyas (also called Paniyars or Paniyans) reside in the beautiful hills of Wayanad and adjoining districts of Kozhikode, Kannur and Malappuram. Known for their courage, they were sold to coffee plantations during colonial times as bonded labour and assigned to steal from other people's plantations. Resettled after the abolition of bonded labour, now Paniyas work as agricultural labourers. Mired in poverty, only a few own land.

CHANGU

The most popular dance form of the Juang tribe, the Changu derives its name and rhythm from the traditional tambourine, changu, which accompanies the performance. It begins with young women forming a straight line facing the men. As the dance progresses, the line becomes semicircular. The women hold each other's wrists, bend, and they move forward and backwards. The men stand straight and shadow the movements of the women, moving in an opposite arc.

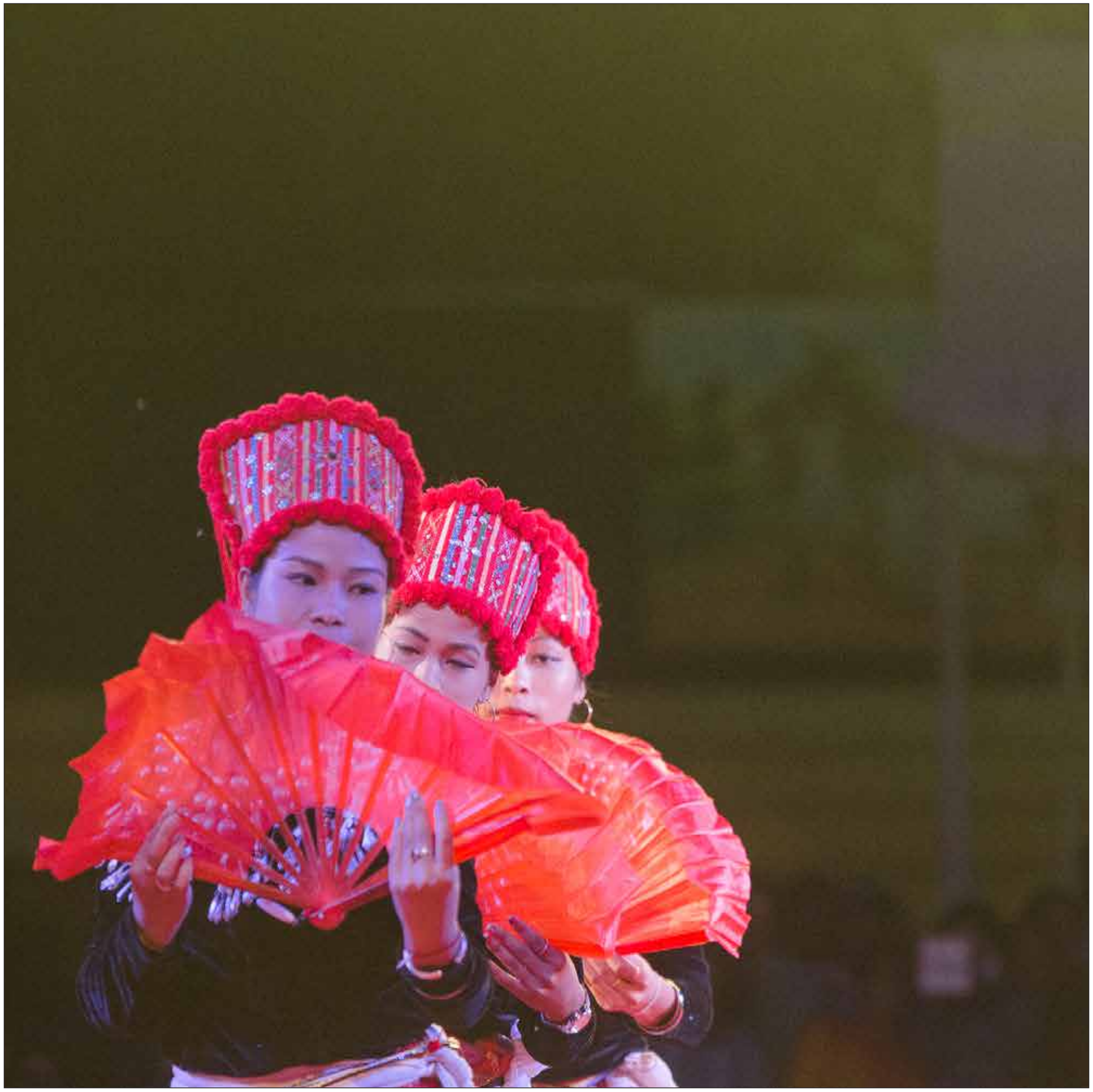
About the tribe: Hailing from the Gonsaika Hills of Keonjhar district and Nagada Hills of Jajpur district in Odisha, Juangs are an Austroasiatic tribal group. Their population is small, estimated at around fifty thousand as per the 2011 census. The community speaks Juang, which belongs to the larger Munda language family. Once hunter-gatherer animists, they are now artisans and sellers of forest produce.



JAIWA

The Jaiwa is a mesmerising dance of the Singpho people. The women perform it to a fast musical arrangement, evoking styles of the Far East. The dance involves the use of props like paper fans. It is traditionally performed at the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi festival, which is commemoration of the progenitor of the tribe.

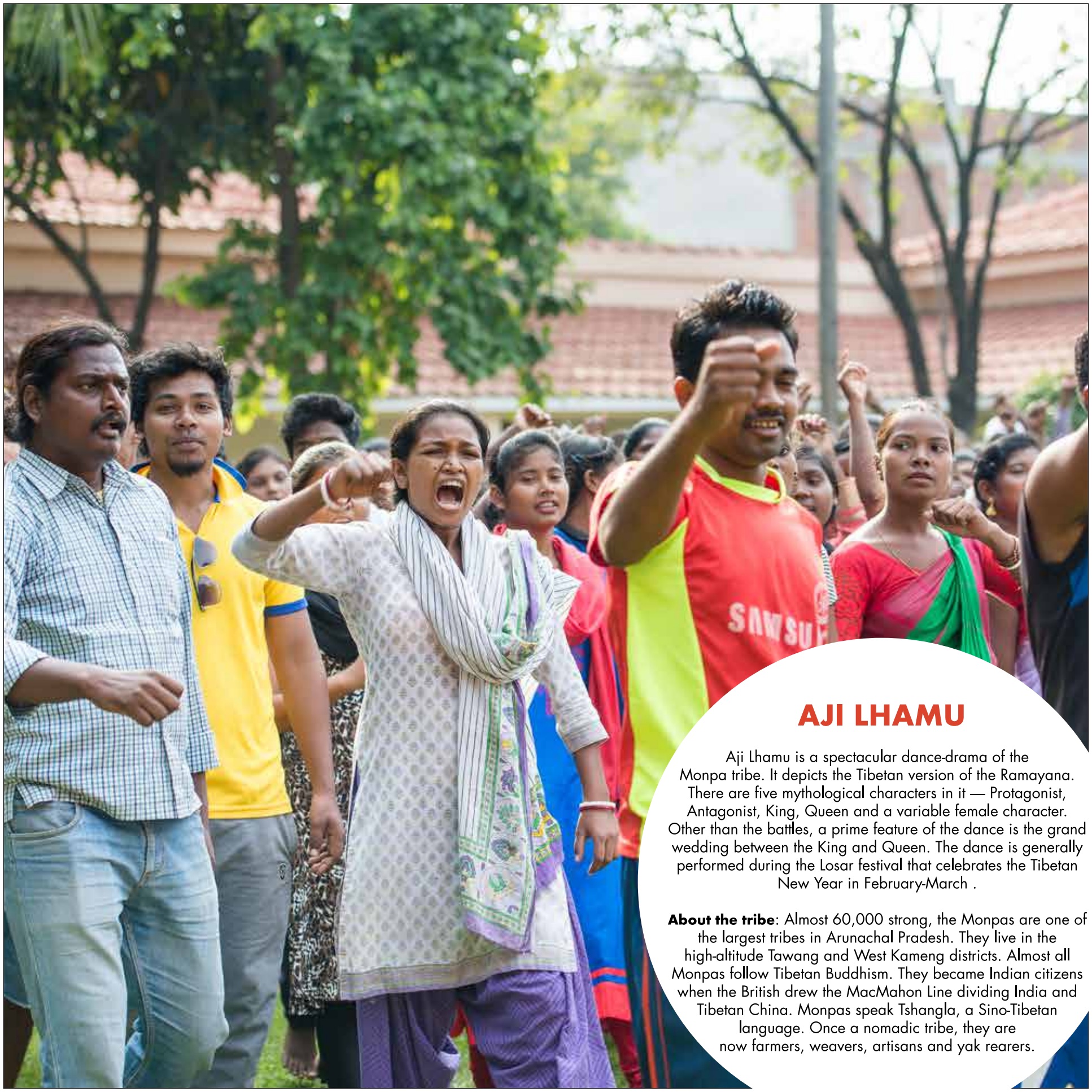
About the tribe: Living in Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh and Tinsukia district in Assam, the Singpho are said to have originated from a warrior clan in the Singra-Boom Hills of Tibet. They migrated to Myanmar first, but a brutal persecution forced them to flee to India. They are a dwindling race; only about seven thousand of them survive. Their language, Singpho, is a dialect of the Tibeto-Burmese stock. Weaving is an essential part of all Singpho households. They are animists.



DANDA SAILA

Young Oraon tribals perform the Saila after the harvest. The dance is a medley of acrobatic movements and foolery. The men and women hold a scarf in one hand and a stick in the other (which they strike together) as they move in different formations. Towards the end, the villagers offer paddy to the dancers, expressing gratitude to Nature.

About the tribe: Oraons are one of the largest tribes in South Asia. They live in the mineral-rich Chota Nagpur Plateau that stretches across Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar. They are also called Kurukh, a name they derive from their hero-king Karakh. Their language, also Kurukh, belongs to the Dravidian family. Traditionally forest and farm workers, today most of them are settled agriculturists. Their religion is Sarna Dharam or the Religion of the Sacred Grove.



AJI LHAMU

Aji Lhamu is a spectacular dance-drama of the Monpa tribe. It depicts the Tibetan version of the Ramayana. There are five mythological characters in it — Protagonist, Antagonist, King, Queen and a variable female character. Other than the battles, a prime feature of the dance is the grand wedding between the King and Queen. The dance is generally performed during the Losar festival that celebrates the Tibetan New Year in February-March .

About the tribe: Almost 60,000 strong, the Monpas are one of the largest tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. They live in the high-altitude Tawang and West Kameng districts. Almost all Monpas follow Tibetan Buddhism. They became Indian citizens when the British drew the MacMahon Line dividing India and Tibetan China. Monpas speak Tshangla, a Sino-Tibetan language. Once a nomadic tribe, they are now farmers, weavers, artisans and yak rearers.

CHICKEN DANCE

The famous Chakhesang Naga Chicken Dance is inspired by their livelihood — primarily agriculture and livestock rearing. It is a lively dance depicting the fragility of a fowl's life. It could also be related to their ancient sacrificial rituals for purification of the body and soul. The dance is generally performed at their pre-harvest festival Tsungmerong and expresses gratitude to Nature.

About the tribe: The Chakhesang Nagas are a prominent tribal group of Nagaland. They are divided into six sub-tribes, Kheza, Chokri, Poumai, Sumi, Pochuri and Rengma. Their villages lie in the mountains and forests of Phek district. A remote village called Khezakeno is at the centre of their religious and cultural identity; they also believe it to be the place of their origin. Chakhesangs speak English and Nagamese. Most of them are Christians, though animism reflects in their cultural expressions.

SATHAR

At the onset of cultivation, the Sathar dance is performed by the Rabha tribe of Assam as a prayer to the Earth to bless them with a good harvest and wealth. Clothed in vibrant shades of green, red and yellow, the dancers create a narrative depicting the process of cultivation. In form, Sathar bears a close resemblance to the famous dance of Assam, Bihu.

About the tribe: Rabha or Rava is an indigenous tribe belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people. Apart from Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam, the community is also found in the Galo Hills district of Meghalaya and Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal. While most Rabhas use Assamese, a few still speak the Rabha dialect of Tibeto-Burman origin. The forest-dwelling, hunter-gatherer Rabhas are animists. However, those who have taken to farming have adopted a mix of Hinduism and animism.

DANDARI

Dandari is a dance that arises primarily as an extension of a singing tradition by the Durua tribe. The dancers hold a bamboo stick in each hand and strike them together as they sing. Traditionally deer antlers (as pictured here) were used as sticks. Once the winter harvest is safe in granaries, a grand feast is organised on a full-moon night. It is then that the Dandari is performed. It is said that the famous Dandiya dance has evolved from Dandari.

About the tribe: The Durua are a sub-group of the Gond, the largest tribal group in India. In the 1500s, they were under a dynastic rule. In 1592, the Muslim armies defeated the Gond army and their powers declined. The Durua live in the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh and parts of Odisha. Many small rivers criss-cross this region of dense forests and hills. The tribe speaks Bhatri, an Indic language; their ancient tongue, Parji, is virtually extinct. Most Duruas are farmers.

DHEMSA

An age-old dance form of the Gadaba tribe, Dhemsa dancers hold each other's shoulders and waists and move to the rhythms of dhol (bass drum), tamak (bongo), changu (tambourine) and mahuri (a type of clarinet). The person playing the mahuri, the Mahuria, leads the music and the percussionists follow. The Dhemsa is performed at night to mark important occasions like harvest festivals, births, deaths and weddings. Every Gadaba village has a Dhemsa troupe.

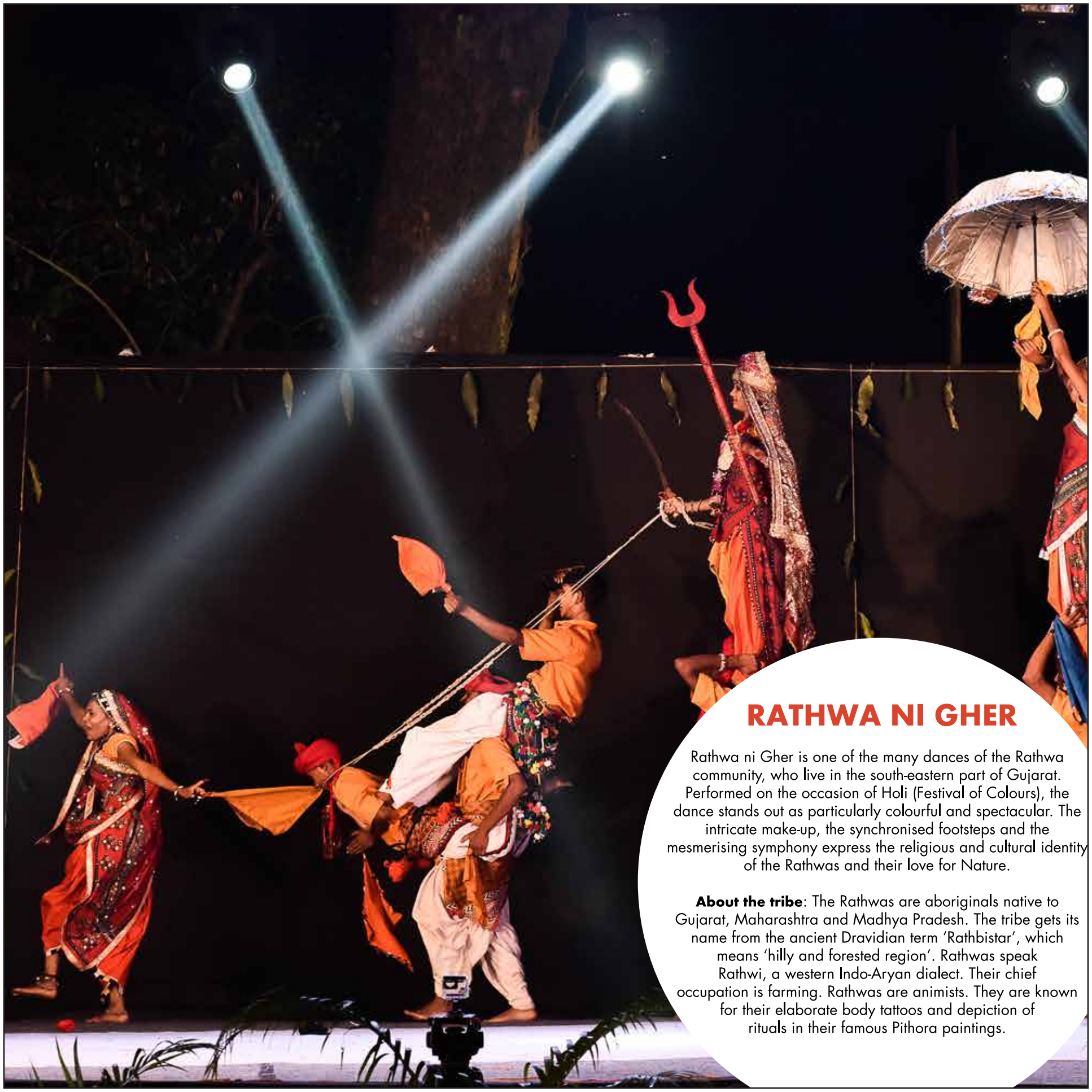
About the tribe: The Gadabas of Odisha are believed to be among the earliest settlers of the region. 'Gadaba' means 'a man carrying weight on his shoulders'. The community was traditionally employed as load bearers. They speak Gutub, a dialect of Austro-Asiatic origin. Gadaba women always wear twin metal chokers that are removed only after they die. Their main occupations are agriculture, hunting and cattle-rearing. Gadabas are animists.


SHAMPA

DRUGPA-RCHES

The Dard Shin community performs the Drugpa-Rches. Dancers adorn flowers, silver ornaments, peraks (traditional headgears) and move to the cries of Surna (a reed instrument of Persian origin) and the beats of damman. Damman is a pair of kettledrums called Fo and Mo, depicting the two genders. The masks are rich with religious symbolism, and the narrative is usually about the triumph of good over evil.

About the tribe: The Greek historian Herodotus (485 BC) mentioned the Dard Shin tribe when they were at the peak of their prowess and their influence extended from north Afghanistan to central Tibet. The Partition in 1947 cleaved their ancestral lands into two and the tribe is now squeezed in the remote Gurez valley in north Kashmir, struggling to save their distinct identity and Shina language.
The last of them — twenty-five thousand Dard Shins — have adopted Buddhism.



RATHWA NI GHER

Rathwa ni Gher is one of the many dances of the Rathwa community, who live in the south-eastern part of Gujarat. Performed on the occasion of Holi (Festival of Colours), the dance stands out as particularly colourful and spectacular. The intricate make-up, the synchronised footsteps and the mesmerising symphony express the religious and cultural identity of the Rathwas and their love for Nature.

About the tribe: The Rathwas are aboriginals native to Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The tribe gets its name from the ancient Dravidian term 'Rathbistar', which means 'hilly and forested region'. Rathwas speak Rathwi, a western Indo-Aryan dialect. Their chief occupation is farming. Rathwas are animists. They are known for their elaborate body tattoos and depiction of rituals in their famous Pithora paintings.

MAMITA

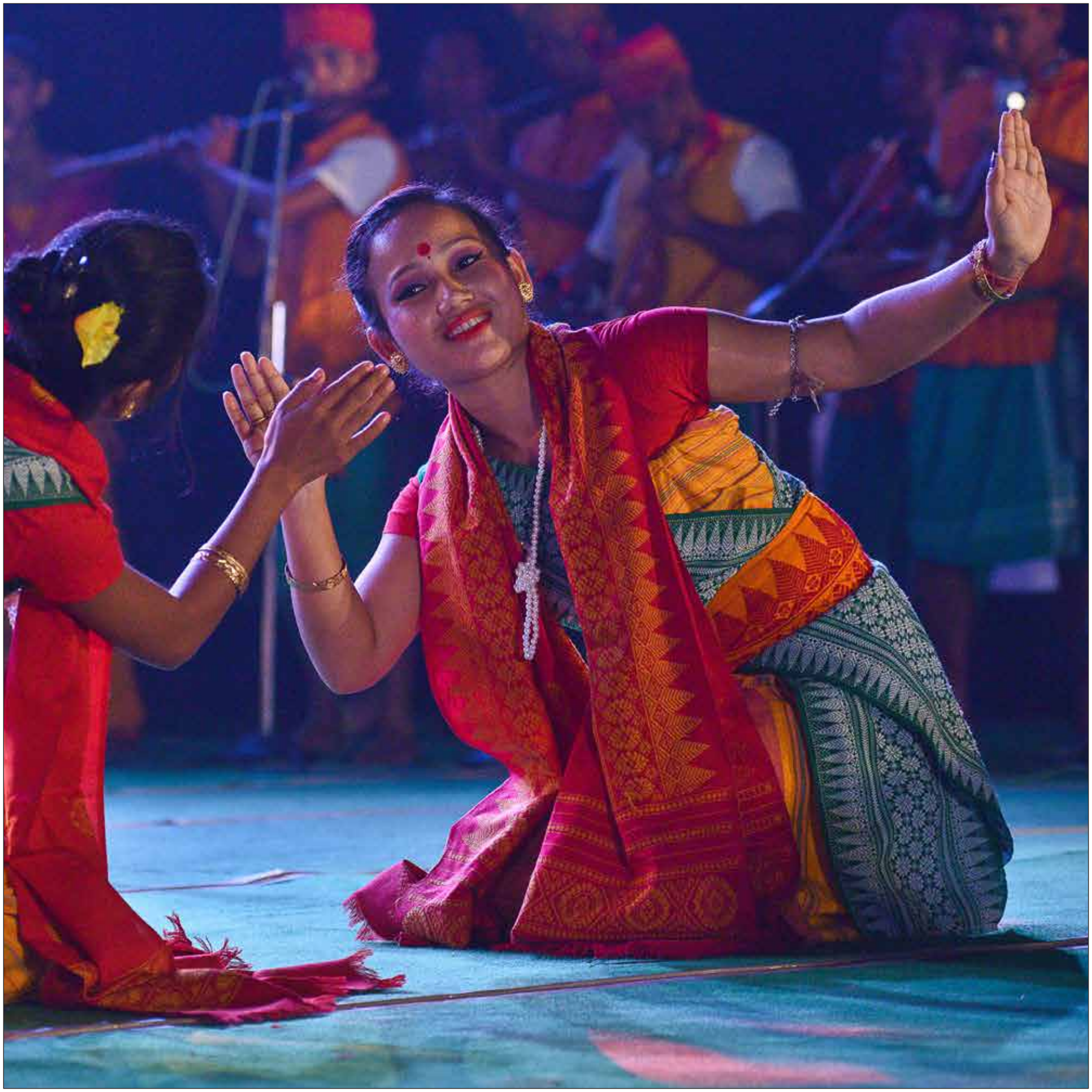
Mamita is performed by Tripuri tribals during Mamita, a post-harvest festivity. Young men and women express gratitude by offering the newly-harvested crop to the local deities of agriculture — Mailuma and Khuluma. Men carry a piece of bamboo that is split down the middle and used as a clapper to provide rhythm to the dance. Women carry flat winnowing baskets to symbolise the process of cleaning agricultural produce.

About the tribe: The largest tribal community in Tripura, Tripuris were subjects of the Twipra kingdom that once spread across northeast India and Bangladesh. Their kings ruled until the 18th Century when it became a subsidiary colony of the British. Tripura was subsequently merged with the Union of India on October 14, 1949. Ethnically of Indo-Mongoloid origins, a majority of Tripuris practice Hinduism and speak Kokborok, which is a Tibeto-Burman dialect.

BAGURUMBA

A springtime dance of the Bodo tribe, Bagurumba is performed by women during the Bwisagu festival to usher in the season of plenitude and cultivation. Bagurumba provides spells of leisure in this time of hard farm labour. It is a gentle formation dance — the women collectively create images of butterflies in flight.

About the tribe: Bodo (pronounced Boro) are an ethnic group of Mongoloid origin and believed to be the earliest inhabitants of Assam. They are the state's largest minority community and are concentrated in the northern Brahmaputra river valley. Most of them are settled farmers, expert weavers and artisans. Their language, Mech, belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese family. Though many of them have adopted mainstream religions, the tribe's supreme deity remains Bathoubwrai, who is a symbolic representation of the five natural elements — Earth, Water, Land, Fire and Wind.



PARDHAUNI

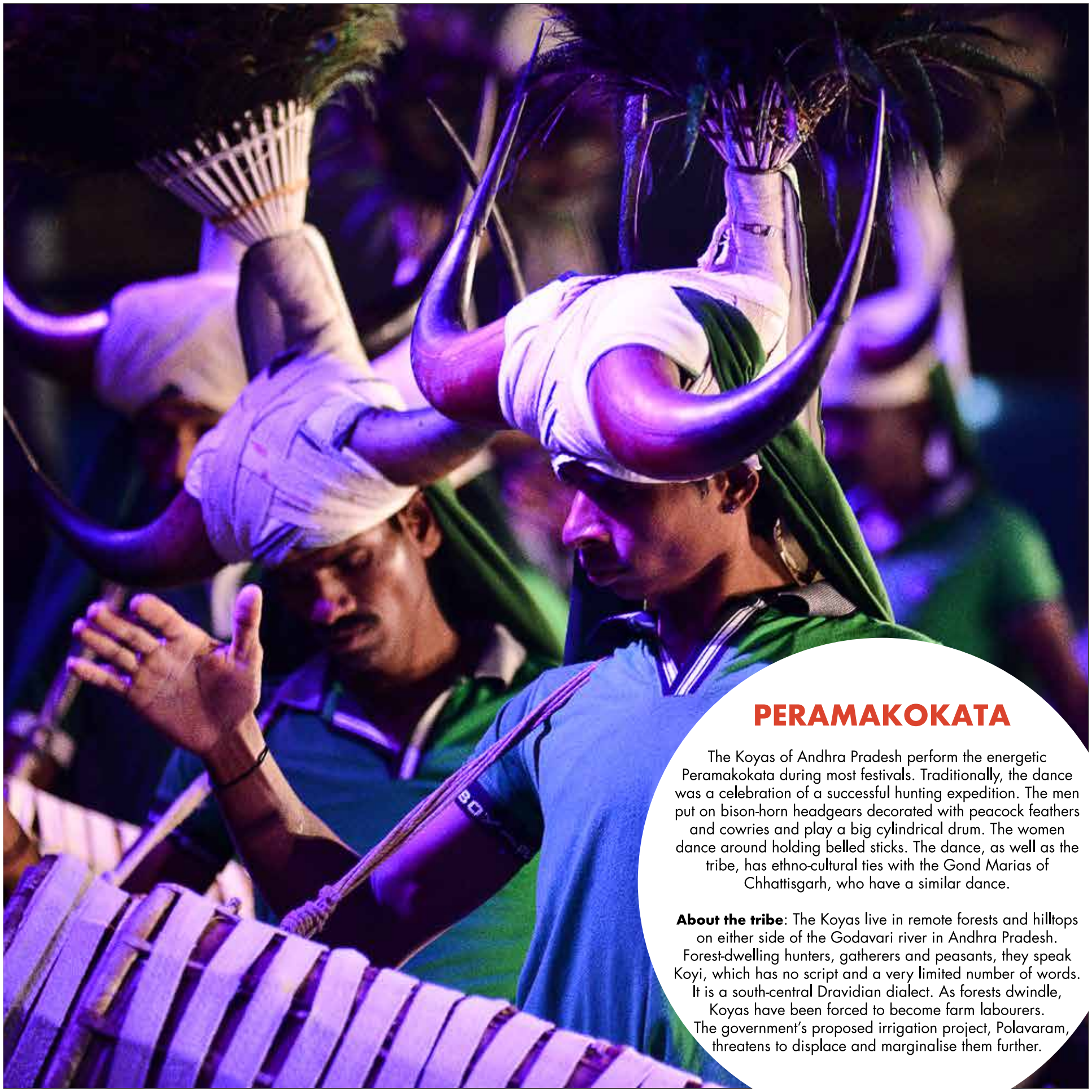
The Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh performs the Pardhauni during weddings. The men in the bride's family welcome the groom's party by donning disguises of various animals and birds and depicting their movements. The Pardhauni is an invitation conveying auspiciousness and joy.

About the tribe: The Baigas are forest-dwelling aboriginals of Madhya Pradesh. Some posit that they have lived there for at least 20,000 years. A 2010 study by the Anthropological Survey of India and the Texas-based Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research found two DNA mutations that are shared exclusively by Australian Aborigines and Baigas. This community depends mainly upon shifting cultivation. Their pantheon is fluid, including elements of Nature and the supernatural. Their traditional language Baingani, a dialect of Central-Dravidian origin, is highly endangered.

HOJAGIRI

Hojagiri, performed by the Reang tribe of Mizoram, is a feat in controlled maneuvers. In this formidable belly dance, the performers do not move their torso. They stand on a pitcher, balance a lit lamp on their heads, carry harvest-related props in their hands and slowly move their hip, waist and feet. In some moves, the dancers bend backwards to lift props from the ground with their mouth.

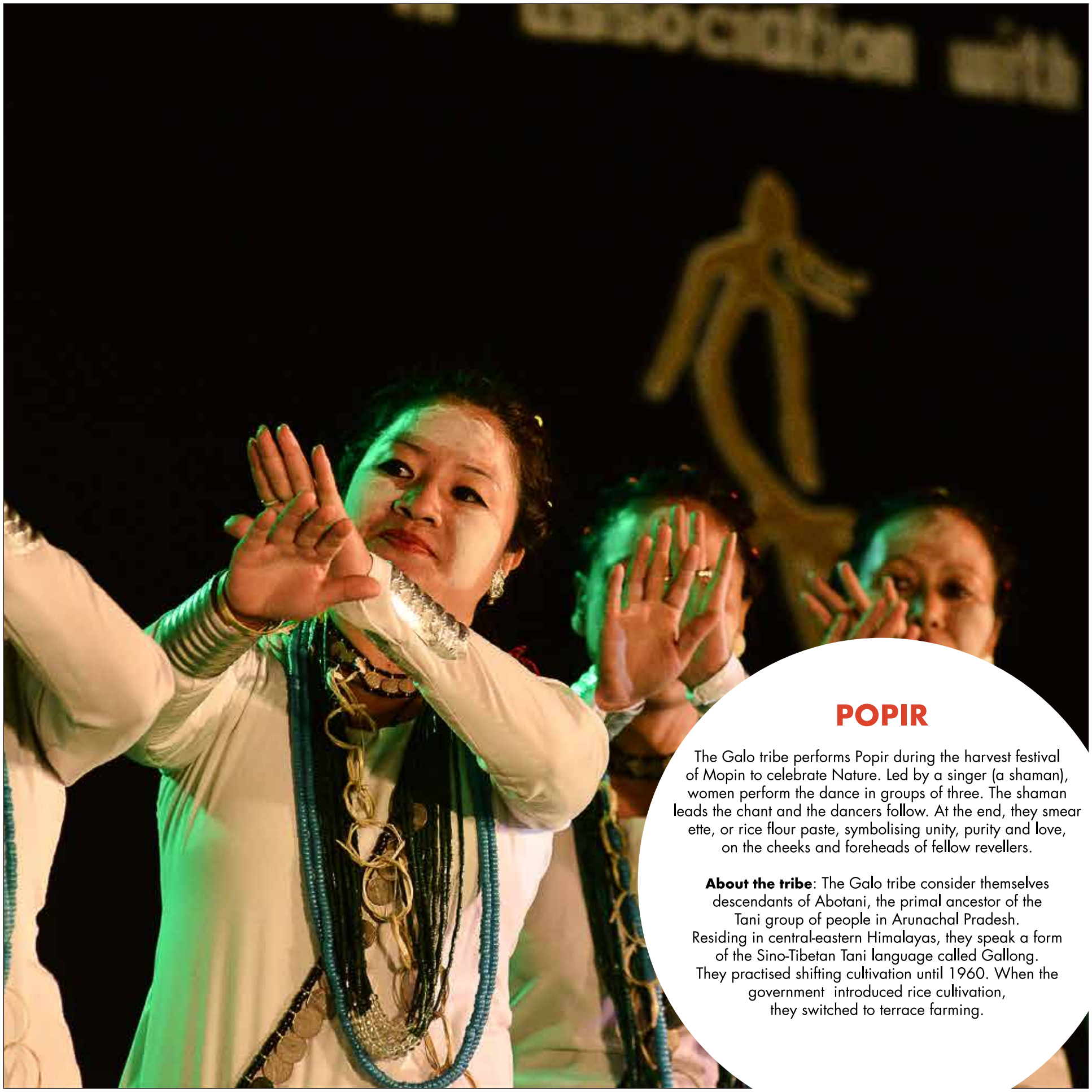
About the tribe: Originally a pastoral tribe from Mizoram, they are the second largest tribe of Tripura. Historically called the Bru people, the tribe was arbitrarily renamed 'Reang' during a government census. In 1997, a bloody ethnic conflict forced thousands of Reangs to flee to Tripura where they live in refugee camps in the Jamui Hills. Many of them follow Hinduism and speak the Kokborok dialect of Tibeto-Burmese origin. The government is trying to repatriate them to their homeland; the Reangs are afraid to return.



PERAMAKOKATA

The Koyas of Andhra Pradesh perform the energetic Peramakokata during most festivals. Traditionally, the dance was a celebration of a successful hunting expedition. The men put on bison-horn headgears decorated with peacock feathers and cowries and play a big cylindrical drum. The women dance around holding belled sticks. The dance, as well as the tribe, has ethno-cultural ties with the Gond Marias of Chhattisgarh, who have a similar dance.

About the tribe: The Koyas live in remote forests and hilltops on either side of the Godavari river in Andhra Pradesh. Forest-dwelling hunters, gatherers and peasants, they speak Koyi, which has no script and a very limited number of words. It is a south-central Dravidian dialect. As forests dwindle, Koyas have been forced to become farm labourers. The government's proposed irrigation project, Polavaram, threatens to displace and marginalise them further.



POPIR

The Galo tribe performs Popir during the harvest festival of Mopin to celebrate Nature. Led by a singer (a shaman), women perform the dance in groups of three. The shaman leads the chant and the dancers follow. At the end, they smear ette, or rice flour paste, symbolising unity, purity and love, on the cheeks and foreheads of fellow revellers.

About the tribe: The Galo tribe consider themselves descendants of Abotani, the primal ancestor of the Tani group of people in Arunachal Pradesh. Residing in central-eastern Himalayas, they speak a form of the Sino-Tibetan Tani language called Gallong. They practised shifting cultivation until 1960. When the government introduced rice cultivation, they switched to terrace farming.