

In all tribal communities in the Eastern Ghats, India, the ecosystem is inseparable from their beliefs, customs and social organisation. Their life style is the product of the dynamic relationship between People and Nature over several generations. They have evolved a pattern of life that worships and preserves their natural environment.



Photo: IDEA

From hunting to ecological protection

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Tribal peoples are the direct descendants of the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. The Aryan invasion from the North around 1500 BC replaced most of the hunter-gathering society by settled cultivation. By 500 BC settled agriculture and pastoralism had covered wide tracts of the country. This transition permitted the new elite to introduce the caste system that divided the society into priests (Brahmans), warriors (Kshatriyas), traders (Vaishyas), peasants (Sudras) and untouchables (Panchamas).

The conquered food gathering tribes were assigned a low status. Most of them maintained their hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation practices. Today, tribal populations constitute about 7% of the Indian population. They live in some 450 communities or tribal units of varying size. In the Eastern Ghats there are 60 tribal communities with about ten million people. There are many differences between the tribal communities culturally, socially and linguistically.

Recent developments in India have caused large-scale environmental degradation, especially in the tropical forest areas inhabited by the tribal peoples. The rich forest, land, river and mineral resources have attracted both industry and government. The growing pressure on the forests in the Eastern Ghats has severely affected the living standards among the tribal peoples. The capacity of the ecosystem to replenish itself has been affected and the tribal peoples have been forced to become part of the process of degeneration.

Totem Symbols

Tribal peoples believe that their ancestors originated from nature. Each clan, therefore, is the direct descendent of a bird, an animal or a tree. This totem is a supernatural power that protects them. Thus, in each community, people identify themselves as belonging to clans such as the Barking Deer, Peacock and Jungle fowl. Each clan has a strong affinity for the species whose names they have adopted. There are many different totemic clans in each community. They will never harm this animal or plant and will protect it as much as possible. This cultural practice was found to be an important starting point for IDEA (Integrated Development through Environmental Awakening). This NGO is trying to halt the degradation of people and nature in The Eastern Ghats. IDEA is documenting the totemic clans and practices of different tribal communities in India.

The totem symbols gradually evolved as the basis for ceremonies, festivals, customary practices and taboos in tribal communities. These taboos act as regulatory mechanisms helping to maintain the stability of the natural and cultural identity of the clans and communities. IDEA considers the concept of totemic clans the basis for conserving biodiversity.

A hunting ceremony transformed

The tribals traditionally hold a ceremonial hunting festival once a year. In some clans this occasion is known as *Ittukala Panduga*. During the first month of the lunar almanac, when the monsoon is about to

begin, a spirit of camaraderie prevails. The men go hunting for three days while the women and elders prepare a festival that lasts for several days. During the festival the people eat what the hunters have caught. However, this festival has created an image of the tribal people as ones who destroy the forests and indiscriminately kill animals.

IDEA has started an environmental project based on Environmental Protection and Development Groups (EPDGs). These groups have a strategy based on discussions with traditional leaders and older tribals. During a meeting the declining number of plants and animals and the deteriorating environmental situation were identified as well as the generation gap that affects the care and knowledge of the natural environment. It was collectively decided that the traditional hunting ceremony *Ittukala Panduga* could be transformed into a natural resources celebration. The objectives of this initiative were to protect nature and to perpetuate the customary living style.

First, courses were organised to exchange views on the traditional environmental protection system. The ancient practice of celebrating hunting was then transformed into a collective exercise in environmental observation and protection of the forest region around the villages. This was initiated in 40 villages in 1988 and has since then spread to some 450 villages. The membership of the EPDGs has risen from a small number of families to 35,000 families in recent years. While the executive committees in each village



During a village-level exchange meeting, farmers indicate where to find herbs and how to use them

are responsible for this activity, IDEA assists in recording and documenting the information.

Two days in the forest

During *Ittukala Panduga* the villagers divide themselves into four subgroups based on age, sex and vocation. Each group spends two or three days in the forest making detailed studies of the availability and location of wildlife, herbal plants, fruit bearing trees, drinking water sources, medicinal herbs and edible tubers. Children between 10 and 15 years record the status and number of each variety of fruit-bearing tree, bird, small game, and note the footprints of animals and common medicinal plants. The principal intention is to prepare them for the complex environmental issues they are likely to meet in the future.

Groups of villagers between 16 and 35 years of age survey tree species observing their qualities for construction, agricultural implements and as sources of income. Grasses, wildlife, sources of water and wastelands are also being recorded. Youth acquainted with the village economy and the resources required for the material wellbeing of the village, observe and record findings. Older members of the community, over the age of 36, survey more complex aspects such as the pattern of shifting cultivation, wastelands, social forest activity and the progress and survival of trees of timber value.

Finally, a group consisting of traditional leaders and tribal medicine men

survey the number and status of plants with medicinal properties. Every group has a leader, selected among its members. Each member's findings are discussed by the group and observations are recorded systematically.

Village discussions

On the third day of *Ittukala Panduga* all the groups assemble in the village and a ritual is performed in front of the goddess *Sanku Devatha*. Each group tells what it has found out about the changes taking place in the environment and the ecology of their village. Together they identify the plants and animal species that are disappearing and that require protection. They note which resources are becoming scarce and try to understand the factors responsible. This sharing of knowledge

works like a sort of seminar on the situation of the flora and fauna of the region. Elders often provide information about the state of particular species when they were young. In this way a rough idea is formed of how much plant and wildlife has dwindled over the years.

This practice, culminating in a village status report, is better than a modern survey done by scientists. It assesses the exact strength of natural resources and the state of biosphere as well as the position of flora, fauna, minerals and water resources. The tribals' knowledge of the lives of animals and plants, the medicinal use of herbs and the nutritional value of plants is amazing.

The Environmental Protection and Development Groups also decide on future activities. There has been considerable improvement in the status of the 50 species on the endangered list. Among the protected animals and bird species are barking deer, rabbit, tiger, leopard, jungle cat, Indian giant squirrel, peacock, red jungle fowl, red spur fowl and the spur fowl. Enforcement of conservation measures is effective since the norms have community support and sanction.

Revival of Adivasi Dharbar

Adivasi Dharbar, or the eco-cultural meeting, is another ancient tribal practice being revived by IDEA to address contemporary issues. Traditionally, group leaders and active members from hundreds of villages would come together to share their experiences. Now the leaders discuss the

outcome of the observation and protection activities taking place in their villages during the festival *Ittukala Panduga*. They discuss the strategies used to stop wildlife and ecological deterioration. They also discuss the experiences of the previous year in improving their ecology and punishing those who disobey the code of behaviour.

The Adivasi Dharbar meeting also helps the villagers to understand the ecological situation on a regional scale. Moreover they come to understand the relevance of their actions in a larger context and respond to macro problems through collective action within EPDGs and like-minded organisations. In recent years, these meetings have been taking place between 20-25 villages and resolutions are made on subjects of regional importance.

Enforcing the resolutions

To enforce these rules, the communities have set up a coordinating committee that closely interacts with the traditional village heads and clan heads. Violations of

Examples of resolutions adopted during Adivasi Dharbar:

- *Podu*, or shifting cultivation should only continue in old patches of forest. New forest patches should not be cleared for *podu*.
- Large trees should not be felled in old *podu* patches
- 50 species of animals and plants have been identified for protection. Children should not destroy the eggs of birds and reptiles they come across while grazing cattle in the jungle.
- All the communities should revive and protect their clan totems.
- Wastelands must be improved. They must be identified and government requested to issue legal rights.
- Government must be asked to provide technical and financial assistance for the rehabilitation of *podu* lands or areas with shifting cultivation.
- Bullock carts belonging to outsiders should be watched and no cart should be allowed to enter the village if it is collecting timber or wood for sale.
- Seeds of local species must be collected from the forest and sown by Environmental Protection Development Group (EPDG) members in degraded/deforested patches in the forest. Every member of EPDG must plant a minimum of 10 plants each in the open lands in the village or in the forest this year.
- EPDGs must develop and strengthen relationships with governmental and non-governmental organisations and people's organisations engaged in similar activities.

the Adivasi Dharbar resolutions are considered a violation of customary law. Punishments are enforced and individuals have to apologise to the heads of the community or pay a fine in cash or kind. In case of a severe violation, like killing or cutting a clan totem - animal or tree - the accused will be ex-communicated. The clan and the community will not allow him to participate in any communal ceremonies until the *Koya Konda*, or Chief of all clans, visits the village. Then a purification ceremony is performed and offerings are given to the killed totem. When the crops, animals or health of the accused are effected because of a curse by the totem, the priest has to perform a purification ceremony for the whole family.

IDEA's trainings, the totemic concepts, the festivals, traditional songs (see below) and the experience of the elders all play a role in taking up these resolutions. As a result of these resolutions, families are dissuaded from practising shifting cultivation. This has prevented approximately 200,000 acres - some 90,000 hectares - of forestland from being reduced to barren patches. The existing cultivated patches are being used for combined reforestation and sustainable agricultural production. Agro-forestry, medicinal plants and horticulture using local varieties are part of this. The EPDGs have also taken up reforestation with local species. Other objectives include stopping the felling of trees for the market and initiating minor irrigation projects.

Major threats

Major threats in the tribal area come from timber merchants who are responsible for



Photo: Bertus Haverkort

Totem symbols in IDEA's training centre

extensive forest destruction and deforestation. Moreover, population growth amongst the tribal groups is leading to increased shifting cultivation and collection of minor forest products. In time, there may not be enough food for people to survive and individual families may decide to take up hunting and shifting cultivation practices again. There are now plans for a watershed development programme to recover agricultural lands that have been eroded and to increase soil erosion control. The communities have asked IDEA for support with the process of maintaining their environment and life styles. In the near future, IDEA may begin to revive other festivals, like the first-eating ceremonies and the seed and soil testing

rituals.

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**SONG for ITTUKA PANDUGA
(Environmental festival)**

**WELCOME -WELCOME - WELCOME-WELCOME
TRIBAL FESTIVAL - OUR FESTIVAL
LET US CELEBRATE - TO GIVE RESPECT TO THE FORESTS AND THE GODDESS
|| WELCOME ||**

**OUR RELATION WITH THE NATURE IS AGE OLD
OUR CLANS AND COMMUNITY NAMES ARE ALL BORNE IN THE WILD
THE GIFT OF OUR MOTHER NATURE
|| WELCOME ||**

**THE JUNGLE FOWL CLANS PROTECT THEIR TOTEM,
LET THE PEACOCK CLAN PROTECT AND WORSHIP PEACOCK
AND LET THE PICUS CLAN WORSHIP PICUS TREE. THESE ARE OUR TOTEMS
-THE SYMBOLS OF OUR CLANS.
|| WELCOME ||**

**LET THE BARKING DEER CLAN PROTECT ITS TOTEMIC CLAN.
THE DEER - DEER LET US TOGETHER PROTECT OUR MOTHER NATURE
AND CLAN TOTEMS - LET US PLEDGE.
|| WELCOME ||**