

# A tribal organisation shows its strengths

Gowtham Shankar K.J.N. and K.S.Prashanth Varma



Photo: Green

The Eastern Ghats of India is home to about 60 tribal groups of around 7 million people. Each tribal group has a distinct style of life based on its eco-cultural practices and beliefs, which are intimately connected with nature. The tribal worldview is based on their animistic religion, which includes the belief that life is controlled and guided by natural and supernatural beings, which live in the surrounding natural environment.

Tribal societies have a rich heritage, which includes various forms of expression and a diverse system of technologies that helped them to survive against all odds for several centuries. They maintain their cultural identity and values through their social organisation, as well as language, festivals, dress, music and dance. Traditional tribal leaders, such as the *poojari* (priests), the *dhisari* (herbal religious medical specialists), the *gurumayi* (magical religious medical women specialists), *sutrani* (traditional birth attendants) and the *gowd* (animal specialists) are the custodians of their knowledge systems. They transfer their experiences from generation to generation and to the community through traditional forms of communication and education.

## Modernisation

The modernisation process and the influx of alien cultures, customs and knowledge have influenced the tribal life in this part of India to a great extent. This started around 1960 and has accelerated in the recent decades. Modernisation has entered into this remote area in many different

In September 2001, a group of tribal leaders from Andhra Pradesh and Orissa in the Eastern Ghats, India, organised an Indigenous Knowledge Mela. During this 4-day fair hundreds of tribal people exchanged their experiences related to agriculture, health, food preparation and socio-cultural practices. The fair highlighted the level of organisation of the *Naik Gotna*, a network of tribal leaders, and outlined ideas to improve the lives of the tribal communities on the basis of local knowledge and technology. This event took place in the research and development centre of IDEA, one of the Compas partner organizations. It was also an opportunity for visiting Compas partners to learn about IDEA's experiences.

ways, like for example, the introduction of the formal education based on Western knowledge systems. When attending the local primary schools, or the secondary schools in the larger towns, the tribal children have to adapt their dress and language as well as their ways of seeking answers to questions. Traditional ways of learning are largely, or totally, ignored in this process.

In a similar way the state and the communities, in the formal efforts to improve tribal livelihoods and to join in the mainstream of development, have ignored the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems and the role of traditional leaders. The government-supported community health workers did not take into account the local health systems, nor the experience of the traditional herbal medicine men, snakebite specialists and midwives. Similarly, in agriculture, the policy based on subsidies and modern development inputs have ignored the existing agro-

ecological practices, which are the lifelines of these tribal communities.

## Ecological destruction

The effects of modernisation are manifold and can be seen, for example, in the ecological destruction of the area. This process started around 1700, when fuel wood was needed for the mining industry. Later on, a large part of the area was deforested to fuel trains and for construction purposes. Bamboo harvesting for the paper factories is another reason for the ecological destruction. The tribal population itself, growing in numbers, has also destroyed considerable part of the natural resources, due to their traditional shifting cultivation practices. In more recent years this process has been accelerated further due to loss of their plains to non-tribals and new forest-based industries.

Following this ecological destruction, rainfall in the area as well as soil fertility has decreased considerably. This has re-



Photo: Green

Ceremony to open the Indigenous Knowledge Fair, presided by traditional leaders



Photo: Green

*Tribal women during the opening ceremony*

sulted in further exploitation of the natural resources, loss of traditional knowledge on agro-ecological practices, and a rapid transformation of the tribal organisation. The modern political administration and development structures have also influenced the position of the tribal leaders. These elements have led to a loss of cultural identity as well as their agro-ecological and health-related practices.

### Intervention of IDEA

Since 1985 IDEA (Integrated Development through Environmental Awakening) is trying to facilitate a process to halt degradation of cultural identity of the tribal people and their natural resources in the North Eastern Ghats. Currently, IDEA is working in 300 villages covering about one hundred thousand tribal people in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. IDEA has started ecological and watershed development projects by organising the tribal communities into different environmental protection and developmental groups.

In this process, for example, the traditional *Chaitra Parob* festival was transformed from a hunting ceremony into a community process to make an inventory of the natural resources in the area (see *Compas Magazine* no.2). In the '90s the traditional leaders continued to discuss their experiences with natural resource practices during a series of eco-cultural meetings. They concluded that the deforestation and rapid depletion of floral and faunal species was due to human interference, especially to the violation of traditional regulations in the communities. This was attributed to the weakened relationships between the traditional leaders and the community. Therefore resolutions were passed to conserve natural resources by reviving their traditional conservation practices.

### The Naik-Gotna network

In 1998 the co-ordination between the tribal leaders and IDEA resulted in the es-

tablishment of the *Naik Gotna* network, the 'Network of Tribal Leaders'. The major objective of the network is to form a strong group of tribal leaders to support the endogenous development process of their communities. Though the starting point of the IDEA activities in the Eastern Ghats has been natural resources management, the traditional leaders in the Naik Gotna have addressed many other themes, like agricultural innovations, herbal medicinal practices for humans, animals and crops, and the production and preparation of wild leafy vegetables with high nutritional value. These practices are being experimented with in the communities; the results are documented by the IDEA staff and exchanged during meetings.

In order to support endogenous development of the tribal communities and prevent further destruction of the local natural resources, the tribal leaders aim for the integration of their local knowledge, practices and structures with modern tribal development institutions and knowl-

edge systems. With the help of IDEA, the Naik Gotna has initiated several activities, ranging from exchange meetings to training sessions, bio-cultural expeditions, and workshops. This has resulted in increased communication between the different tribes and communities in the area.

IDEA is providing technical support for certain themes, as well the documentation and information skills, which includes the use of Western knowledge. Numerous documents have been published, especially in the local tribal languages. The IDEA website has special emphasis on the different tribal groups, natural resources, medicinal plants, indigenous chicken species, as well as eco-tourism possibilities in the Eastern Ghats. The information is also displayed in the IK resource conservation centre run by IDEA in co-ordination with the Naik Gotna. This process of documentation, education and experimentation forms the basis of a unique system of *in-situ* conservation of tribal knowledge and practices.

### Indigenous Knowledge Mela

The Naik Gotna has organized its first indigenous knowledge fair from 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> September 2001. During 4 days hundreds of representatives, a bright mix of tribal women and men of all ages and from different tribal communities, gathered in the IK resource conservation centre of IDEA. A wide range of traditional practices, medicinal plants, rituals, and food preparation with local ingredients were exhibited. Several workshops were organised, at which knowledge on different aspects was exchanged between the participants.

The major objective of this event was to provide a platform for the tribal communities to exchange and demonstrate their knowledge, practices and experiments. This included practices related to agriculture and soil conservation, natural resources, traditional medicine for hu-



Photo: Green

*The leaders of the Naik Gotna Network from the different tribal communities*

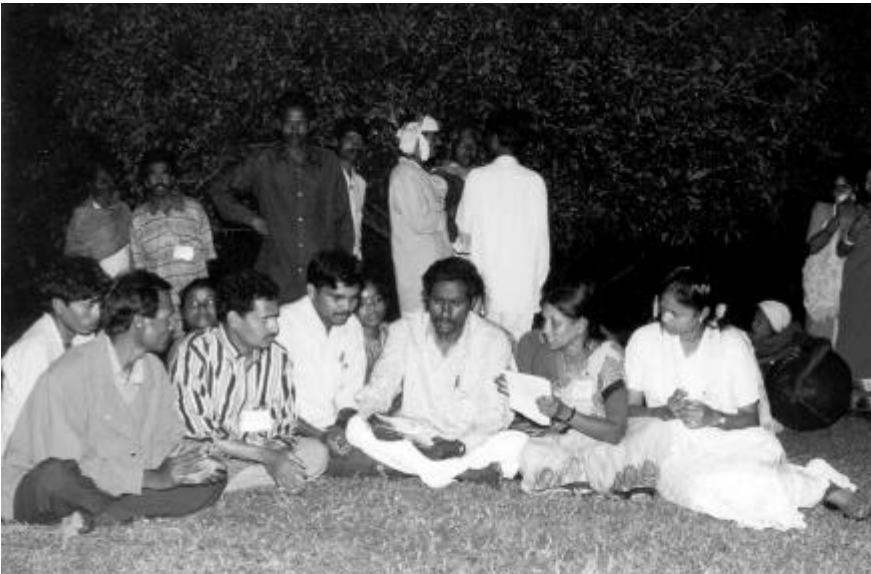


Photo: Green

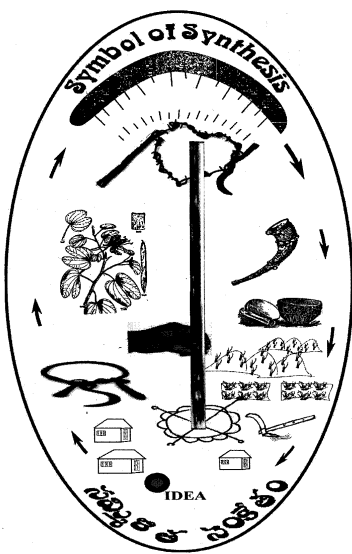
**Oh! Brother come and join our environmental protection campaign  
IDEA is calling us**

**WE - the dear children of nature  
We were born and brought up in Mahindragiri hills and valleys  
Our abode is the treasure of natural resources.  
IDEA is calling us to protect our abode**

**IDEA staff singing 'Call for environmental protection' during the IK fair**

mans and animals, as well as folklore, bio-cultural practices and development-related rituals. The event created a platform for inter-cultural dialogue and strengthened the networking between different tribal communities. Moreover, it provided an opportunity to show the relevance of tribal indigenous knowledge to local policy makers and administrators.

The increasing strength of the Naik Gotna has not gone unnoticed. The tradi-



**Symbol of Synthesis, the logo of the Naik Gotna Network. The symbol has been designed by the tribal leaders and includes the sacred stick and its chain to communicate with the spiritual world, traditional instruments, agricultural fields, the villages, and IDEA providing support to this tribal organisation**

tional leaders themselves experience great satisfaction. Gollori Sadu, one of the leaders of the Naik Gotna network explains: *"We started 3 or 4 years ago; it was our own idea based on our own experiences. Now we are very big, some 5000 traditional leaders from 400 villages! Now we are here from many communities from Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, see how far it has spread! In our fathers' days we used to have a good system in our villages - but now this is vanishing. Now we are protecting and reviving what is ours. We are remembering the past and training the next generation. We want to strengthen the Naik Gotna network and expand it to different areas, and interact with more people. We want to show everybody who we are and what we know, because we need the cooperation of various organisations."*

### **In-situ conservation**

Far from giving the feel of a museum, this activity showed the importance of maintaining the practices in the hand of the people themselves. By sharing the results of their experiments with representatives of other tribal communities during the numerous workshops, the experiences were analysed and deepened. In this way the IK Mela provided another opportunity for in-situ conservation of indigenous practices. During the IK mela stu-

dents from a nearby university supported the IDEA staff in documenting the experiences and practices shared by the participants.

The Naik Gotna members were proud of their mela. Gollori Saddu explained: *"The IK Mela is the best thing we have done so far. Look how many of us have come! Here we can show what we know and who we are in regards to our agriculture, our medical practices, food practices, and our rituals and beliefs. See how the representatives of the government came, and how they were impressed with what they saw and heard. The government has never been able to fully stop the problems with the environment. Now they are impressed with what they hear from us and how we are integrating our indigenous knowledge, worldviews and institutions with modern knowledge systems, institutions and world views for meaningful tribal development"*

Though the Mela was very successful, it was not easy to organise this major event. Gollori Saddu: *"The IK Mela has been very good, but it has been difficult to mobilise and handle so many people. Especially to arrange for them to go back to their homes; we have to take care of everyone!"*

### **Major challenges**

The Naik Gotna, as a new organisation of tribal traditional leaders, cannot lean on similar former experiences. The organisation will have to face major challenges in a fast changing world, as its pride and suc-



Photo: Green

**Village based museum about tribal culture and cosmology at IDEA's centre**



Girls dancing the traditional way

cesses grow. Efforts are being made to support the forum to work in the direction of strengthening the tribal cultural identity, while co-ordinating with modern knowledge systems and institutions.

The dream of the tribal leaders integrated in the Naik Gotna is to develop their tribal communities in an integrated, sustainable way, based on their own worldview, knowledge and experiences. This explains their emphasis on the analysis of their worldviews, the significance of their festivals and rituals, the documentation of their knowledge and the experiments with their practices. This IK Mela has been a major activity of the Naik Gotna, which has helped them to show

their activities and strength, both to the tribal communities themselves and to representatives of the outside world. The positive response and interest of all involved indicate that this tribal organisation is on the right track to face the challenges that inevitably lie ahead.

#### IDEA

Flat no. 6A, Maharaja Towers  
R.K. Mission Road  
VISAKHAPATNAM 530 003  
India  
tel +91 891 535685  
fax +91 891 535685  
e-mail: gowtham@satyasaionline.net.in

#### The effect of tribal determination

The resolutions of the traditional tribal leaders and active members of hundreds of villages, during the *Adivasi Dharbar*, or eco-cultural meeting in 1998, have not been without effect. During that occasion it was decided to actively revive the harmonious relationship between the tribals and the forests by integrating the traditional natural resource conservation practices and rituals. Families have changed their shifting cultivation practices, which 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. Reforestation with local species, agro-forestry, medicinal plants and horticulture using local varieties are part of this. Organic agriculture is promoted by widespread experiments and exchange on organic practices as well as distributing several plant-based organic insecticides throughout the area. DINARCS (Development Interaction and Natural Resource Conservation Services), a division of IDEA, is now co-ordinating these efforts.

Several development significant festivals have been revived such as *Chaitra Parob* festival (nature conservation, customs

and seed testing), *Nuakia* (first eating ceremony), *Ashada Jatra* (festival to prevent pests in crops and animal diseases) and *Bali Parob* (soil testing ritual) are some of the examples. Several (about 76) species of birds, wild animals, tree species, reptiles have been protected through totemic clan concepts. A groups of traditional leaders have also initiated a tribal traditional seed conservation programme called Bion - 'seed' in tribal language - with a range of traditional crop seeds and edible tubers (273 varieties) and conserving and propagating them. They have published a newsletter on the traditional seeds. The seeds are shown in the IDEA resource centre, where they are actively exchanged with seed varieties from other regions.

About 365 species of medicinal plants have been collected and documented, and are now conserved and propagated in the IDEA resource centre. This is being managed by the local herbal medical man, farmers research units and dormitory students. The dhisari-network has trained about 120 tribal youth on herbal medical practices. Women traditional leaders, such as the *gurumayi* - magico religious herbal medical women - have also initiated the conservation of wild leafy vegetables with a collection of 78 species so far and are promoting their use in the villages to improve health and nutritional status.