

Indigenous Culture

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Indigenous communities around the world are bearers of strong traditional culture, art, craft and knowledge of the environment. Recognising their skills to sustainably use local, cultural and natural resources forging a balanced nature-culture relationship, in 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This Declaration establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world, and elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples. It is estimated that there are more than 476 million indigenous people in the world, spread across 90 countries and representing 5000 different cultures. They make up 6.2 per cent of the global population and live in all geographic regions.¹

The cultures and diversity of indigenous people in India are fascinating. Roughly 104 million people, which is 8.6 per cent of the national population, live in such communities. Although there are 705 officially recognised ethnic groups, the actual number of indigenous communities is much larger. Some regions having large concentrations of such communities are the North Eastern States, Rajasthan and West Bengal.

With distinct social and cultural traditions that are rooted in their collective ties and ownership of the land through generations, the dependence of these communities on nature is inextricably linked to their identities, cultures, livelihoods, as well as their physical and spiritual well-being. Their traditional knowledge and cultural expressions reflect their scientific living, advanced technologies and high level of human skills. Their intimate knowledge of the local flora and fauna, seeds, medicines, agriculture, fishing, architecture, textile, food, etc., provides the basis for a truly sustainable path of development. A World Bank Report on indigenous peoples states that, "While Indigenous Peoples own, occupy, or use a quarter of the world's surface area, they safeguard 80 per cent of the world's remaining biodiversity. They hold vital ancestral knowledge and expertise on how to adapt, mitigate, and reduce climate and disaster risks."²

Unfortunately, these traditional ways of life, livelihoods and practices of indigenous communities in India are increasingly under threat owing to a range of factors, including lack of recognition and protection of their rights, exclusionary public policies, and the impacts of climate change. Illustrating the observations with some of India's native and indigenous cultures can be interesting.

The Adis of Arunachal Pradesh

The Adis constitute one of the numerous indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh. They believe that they travelled from the North to settle down in their current locations of the temperate and sub-tropical regions of



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the districts of Siang, East Siang, Upper Siang, West Siang, Lower Dibang Valley, Lohit, Shi Yomi, and Namsai. The literal meaning of Adi is 'hill' or 'mountain top'. Adis speak the Sino-Tibetan language.

They are traditionally nature worshippers and follow the faith of Donyi-Polo. Adis, like most other indigenous communities, are dependent on nature and are fully self-sufficient in their livelihood and lifestyle. All their resources come from the forests which they also protect as their life source. One of the well-known age-old skills is their house-making expertise, and they take just one or two days to build a house, depending on its size and the number of persons involved in the construction.

Adis live in typical raised houses which are usually rectangular and are built on stilts. One can identify an Adi house by its tall overhanging double roof covering the upper front portion of the house. Majority of the Adi men-folk are good craftsmen, and have a unique way of building houses using different types of plant materials. These traditional houses are constructed with different types of bamboos, woods, canes, leaves, etc., and no nails are used in their construction. The walls of the house are made from timbers and bamboos, the floor is made with bamboo, and the roof with thatched leaves. Ropes, used in construction, are made from natural materials, and processed and procured for strength and durability. The season for collecting each building material varies between a few weeks to one and half years and requires pre-processing to ease construction. These are also collected based on the phase of the moon. Materials collected just before the new moon are free from insects, and last long, whereas those that are collected at other times are said to be vulnerable to termites and insects. The size of the house varies according to the number of members in the family. Houses are constructed mostly in an east-west direction that helps to receive maximum sunlight. A traditional Adi house has no windows, instead there are two doors, one at the front and another at the back. Every house has one

or more fireplaces. The entire inner space of the house is without any partition. However, the space is divided into several units, each having specific names and utilities. Once a house is complete, the Adis celebrate it with their traditional rice beer.

The Tangsas of Arunachal Pradesh

The Tangsa community inhabit the Changlang district of eastern Arunachal Pradesh, located in the lap of Patkai hills. The gorgeous Noa-Dehing river cuts through the pristine forests, providing life to the local settlers.

The Tangsas have a rich cultural heritage and are the bearers of traditional knowledge and skills of natural food processing and preservation, sustainable cooking, weaving, architecture and basketry. Among these, one of the most fascinating practices that they actively continue till date is that of indigenous bamboo tea-making. The Tangsas, along with the Singphos, are believed to be the original tea-makers in India, much before the British introduced it commercially.

From a time actually unknown to them, Tangsas are processing tea leaves following their traditional methodology which provides for natural preservation of the roasted dry tea for many years. The process starts with plucking of tea leaves from their village gardens, to drying in fire, roasting inside fresh bamboo tube, and finally producing a solidified form. For making the drink, they cut open the thin layer of bamboo tissue around the solid dry tea, and cut small pieces that are used to brew the tea. Traditionally, the brewing was also done in bamboo tubes but nowadays, kettles are also used. They drink this tea daily as it is supposed to have medicinal values. Bamboo is not only used for traditional tea-making but has an overarching utility in the Tangsa lifestyle too. The staple diet of Tangsas and their traditional cuisine consisting of rice, meat, and fish are all cooked in bamboo tubes directly placed on fire.



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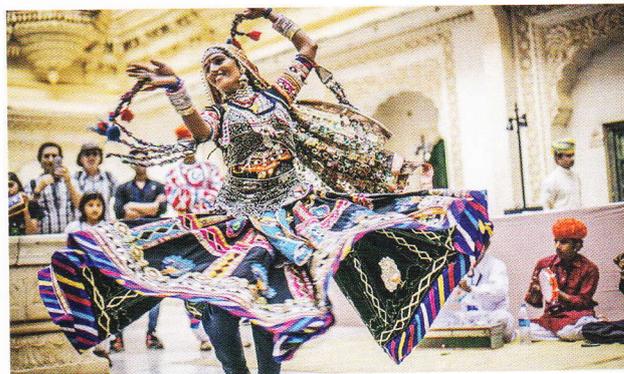
Owing to their rich traditional knowledge of local vegetation and their integral link to nature, they are experts in using different types of local bamboo and leaves for making their houses and other daily utility items like baskets, utensils, containers, mats, etc., all of which make their living completely sustainable.

The Kalbelias of Rajasthan

Kalbelia is a unique community of traditional snake-charmers by profession. They belong to the family of Navnaths, a nomadic community from the Yogi sect. Locally, they are also referred to as 'ghoomantar', meaning the ones who wander. A few decades ago, they settled in Chopasni region of Jodhpur in Rajasthan, where around 200 Kalbelias reside. About 100 of them are active performers at regional, national and international levels. The masters or Gurus of Kalbelia song, music and dance, who live in Chopasni are Kalunath Kalbelia, Appanath Kalbelia, Asha Sapera, Suwa Devi, and Samda Sapera. Kalunath is considered a living legend of this folk art form.

The knowledge of their cultural forms and practices are completely oral and are passed down through generations. In the local language, Kal means 'snake' and Belia means 'friendship'. Since the enactment of the Wildlife Act of 1972 and subsequent ban on snake-handling, the Kalbelias have lost their traditional profession and pursued their performing art for their livelihoods. The Kalbelia tradition is rich in indigenous music, songs, dance and handicrafts (embroidery and ethnic jewellery)— all combining together to create this vibrant and colourful folk form. The striking features of their gorgeous costumes with swirling movements of the dancers and snake-like movements make Kalbelia one of the most stunning folk dance forms. Kalbelia dancers are known worldwide for their exuberant and energetic dance. The men play music, their main instrument being the wind instrument called Pungi or Been that is accompanied by percussion instruments, Daffi and to the beats and tunes of which the Kalbelia women dance. They are also known for their extensive knowledge of local flora and fauna, and making of traditional medicines from natural ingredients.

There is a considerably large body of research and films on Kalbelias of Rajasthan and their ancestry. It is believed that their ancestral ties date back to the Romas who had migrated and settled down in America and Europe decades back. Kalbelia is inscribed in the UNESCO 2003 Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. However, the situation of the artists at the villages is very poor, and the



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numbers of Kalbelia musicians and dancers are decreasing, owing to lack of opportunities and the necessity to adopt other income generating activities.

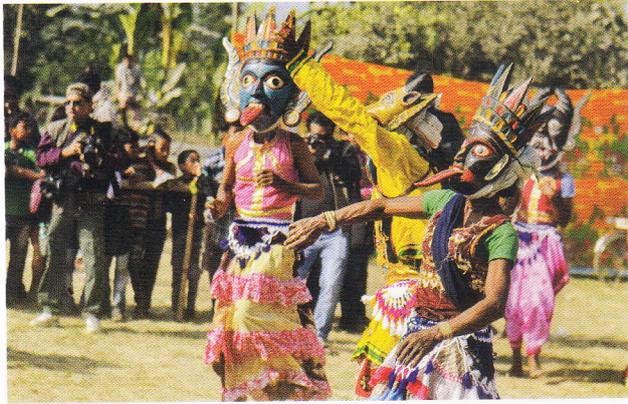
The Kalbelia artists have been featured in many films like Lamhe, Rudali and many documentaries are being made on the artists. Books have been written on the Kalbelia dance. Their social and economic marginalisation is high, significantly affecting their livelihood and dignity of life. Kalbelia women as dancers play a vital role in taking their cultural tradition forward and enjoy equal participation in the practice of this art form. Their aspects of culture, migration, and way of life influence the social construction of the lives of these women, which is worth documenting.

The Rajbongshis of West Bengal

Rajbongshi is an indigenous community living in West Bengal, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and various North Eastern parts of India. They are one of the largest and ancient ethnic groups of North and South Dinajpur of West Bengal. Agriculture is the main pillar of their rural economy, owing to the rich and conducive natural conditions. They also have a rich heritage and culture which had been inherited from the ancient civilisation, including their own dialects, art forms, and way of living. The word 'Rajbongshi' literally means 'royal community', as they are believed to have hailed from the ancient Koch kingdom. Once, the rulers of their lands suffered loss of land ownership and their sustainable rural economy with the advent of the British and other external entities.

Rajbongshis have a diverse repertoire of indigenous art forms such as Bamboo and Dhokra crafts, performing arts like Gomira Dance (Mukha Nach) and the satirical folk drama, Khon. Traditionally, the

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community being animists, all these cultural forms relate to nature and spirituality, sustainable practices based on natural resources, and knowledge of local biodiversity.

Gomira dance, locally known as Mukha Nach, is a form of ritualistic dance or musical folk theatre, practised by this community by putting on Gomira wooden masks of different forms of deities. The performers believe that once they put on the mask, it comes alive and takes over the dancer's persona to reflect its own. Instruments include drums, dhak, shehnai and metal gong; costumes include colourful dresses in accordance to the character portrayed. These performances provide the communities with livelihood support, however, minimal.

Gomira mask makers mostly inhabit Kushmandi block in Dakshin Dinajpur and Kaliaganj block in Uttar Dinajpur. Around 250 artists live in these two blocks, mainly concentrated in the villages of Mahishbathan, Sabdalpur, Beldanga, Ushaharan, Madhupur, Berail, Mangaldai, Kaliyaganj, etc.

Every village organises at least one Gomira dance festival customarily during the months of Chaitra-Ashad (April-July), at a central location, which is usually the village temple. Gomira dance is mainly organised to



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appease the village deity, Goddess Chandi, and usher in her blessings. The masks are also offered to the deities for wish fulfillment of the worshippers. The dance starts with a musical prelude followed by *Vandana*, or the evocation of the Goddess, followed by the main performance. In recent times, the youth in the region are taking a renewed interest in pursuing and promoting the tradition to keep it alive.

Dhokra or jute mat weaving is an indigenous tradition practised by the Rajbongshi women in the villages of Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur districts. Weaving is done on home-based back strap looms. Jute, which grows locally, is hand processed and hand-woven to produce the natural fibre products, making the process as well as the products highly sustainable. Dhokra weaving is a source of livelihood for the women. They not only sell the mats in local haats but have also started diversifying their products for urban consumers. Dhokra products have already made a distinctive mark in the handicraft and home design space.

The Rajbongshi community also practises a satirical improvisational folk drama called Khon, which is believed to be a nearly 200 years old traditional art form. The word Khon in Rajbongshi, means 'moment'. Stories are based on local incidents which are dramatised with a comical style of presentation. A performance combines dialogues, songs and dance. Khon songs are said to have evolved from Ramayana songs. The uniqueness of Khon is that there is usually no pre-written script. The art form has been integral to local festivals and rituals.

Conclusion

It is evident that these unique traditional knowledge systems, art and crafts have a deep rooted relationship of interdependency and reverence with nature. From time immemorial, indigenous communities have generated and nurtured oral cultural traditions of songs, theatre, dance, and social customs to help them survive the test of time with faith and hope. When the world is struggling for solutions and success in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, there are hundreds of indigenous communities across the country which do not have any carbon footprint of their traditional ways of living. These communities are mostly self-sufficient and live with their wisdom of nature and culture that need to be recognised and protected urgently, instead of homogenising with the dominant global culture. A crucial element of conservation of natural and cultural heritage is in understanding and attaining the balance between man, nature, and culture in a conscious way. □

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