

## Tourism Potential in Tribal Regions

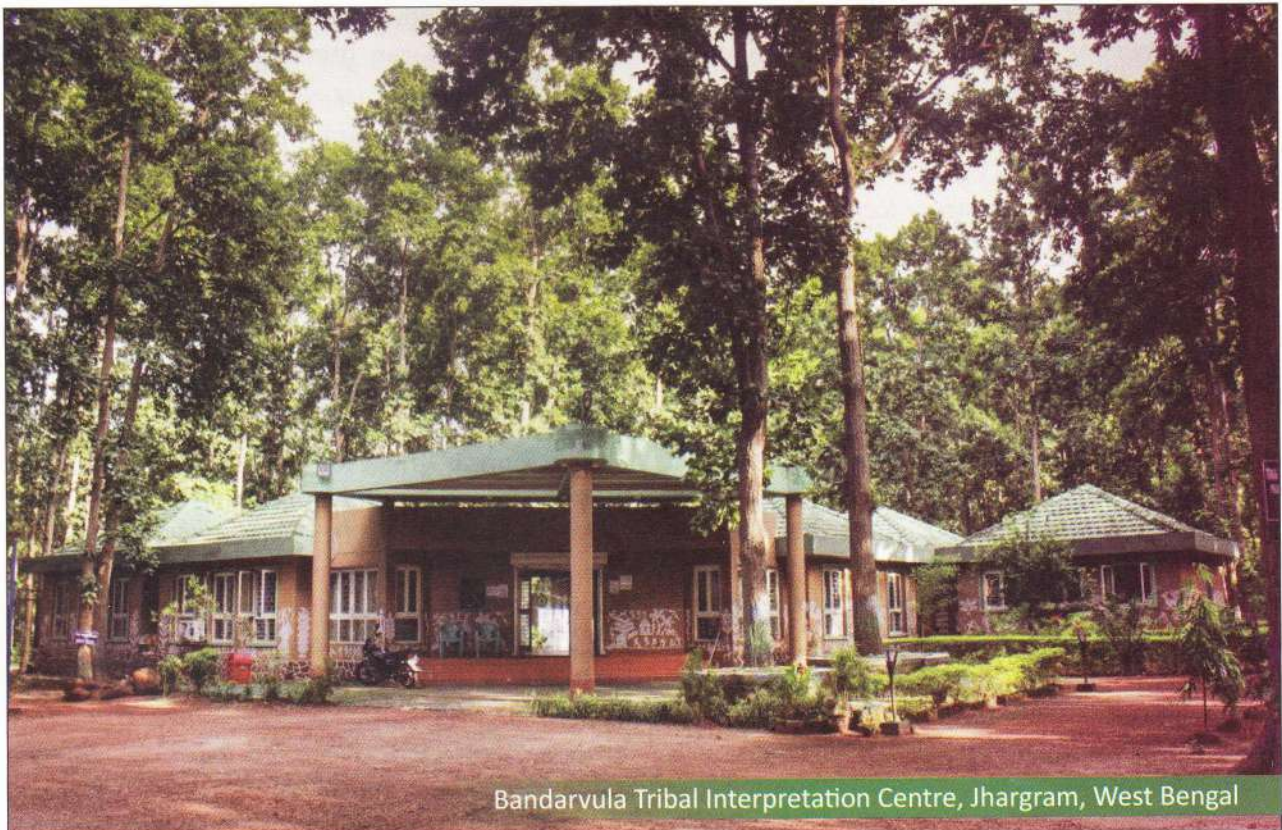
*Dr. Suyash Yadav*

Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.6 percent of India's population and they exhibit enormous diversity. Their protection and development require attention. The ecological setting in which they live, along with their unique cultural attributes are facets that can be a tourism offering. This will aid in the preservation and promotion of the tribal culture, if planned holistically. Owing to the sheer diversity and the sensitivities in the tribal population of India, there can't be 'one size, fits all' approach to tribal tourism development pan India; rather it has to be a tailor made approach for tribal regions of tourism potential, identified after due diligence. Monitoring the negative socio-cultural impacts of such form of tourism and regulating or re-sculpting tourism development plans accordingly is very important.

**I**ndia has one of the largest and diverse tribal populations in the world. The tribal population has a distinct culture and history, though in terms of numbers they are a small minority. The population of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the country, as per Census 2011, stood at 10.45 crore; STs constitute 8.6 percent of the country's total population. Tribes are enormously diverse in respect of language, ecological settings in which they live, physical features, size of their population, modes of making a livelihood and level of development. There is

a lot to learn from tribal cultures and systems. UN Commission on Sustainable Development highlighted the key role of Indigenous people in the conservation of natural areas and species on their lands.

The category of 'Scheduled Tribes (STs)' has politico-administrative dimension whereas the word 'tribe' has socio-cultural connotations. It is to be noted that over 80 percent of STs work in the primary sector. Madhya Pradesh tops all the states with 14.7 percent ST population of the country. The largest number of tribal communities is found in Odisha.



Bandarvula Tribal Interpretation Centre, Jhargram, West Bengal

Source: <https://jhargram.gov.in/tourist-place/bandarvula-tribal-interpretation-centre/>



Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of India such as Sentinelese and Jarawa tribes of the Andaman Islands have pre-agricultural system of existence. There are total 75 PVTGs in India. Their characteristic features include practices of hunting and gathering, zero or negative population growth, extremely low level of literacy in comparison with other tribal groups. PVTGs belonging to Andaman and Nicobar survived the tsunami through understanding the patterns and forces of nature.

The findings of Xaxa Committee on socio-economic, health and educational status of tribal communities of India gave important insights regarding the status of tribes in India. Protection and development of tribes are the two most fundamental issues related to the community. Almost 60 percent of the forest cover of the country is found in tribal areas. Traditional tribal economy depends on forests and other natural resources available in their habitat. Some tribal communities have adopted a way of life, similar to the neighbouring non-tribal communities. Tribal-inhabited regions are rich in mineral, forest and other resources, therefore large-scale development projects are invariably located in those areas. Land is the basis of socio-cultural, religious identity and livelihood of a tribe. A massive push to a development agenda with economic liberalisation characterised by the private companies entering into tribal areas has been met with ample resistance by tribes.

According to Centre for Science and Environment, about half of the top mineral-producing districts are tribal districts. Researchers are of the view that social and geographical isolation of the tribal community from the outside world can be attributed to their poverty. Tourism related to indigenous people can be used to diminish this isolation. Owing to the sheer diversity and the sensitivities in the tribal population of India, there can't be 'one size -fits all' approach to tribal tourism development pan India; rather it has to be a tailor made approach for tribal regions of tourism potential, identified after due diligence.

### Tribal Tourism in India

In order to ensure economic and social prosperity for the tribal community of India, a well-planned, sensitively executed and holistically monitored policy intervention aimed at identifying,

preserving, and promoting tribal heritage is required. Tribal people are often known by terms such as indigenous (native) people, aboriginal people, *moolnivasi* (original inhabitants), *adivasi*, *janajati*, hunter-gatherers, etc. There are over 476 million indigenous people living in 90 countries across the world, accounting for 6.2 percent of the global population. Indigenous people of India constitute the second largest tribal population in the world after Africa. World Tribal Day is observed on 9<sup>th</sup> August every year. November 15<sup>th</sup> has been declared as the National Tribal Pride Day.

The intangible heritage that the tribal population possesses including the traditional knowledge system contains many positive and productive elements that are really precious for the entire humanity. Tourism can be one of the tools through which, the rich cultural heritage of the tribes manifested in its folklore, costume, jewellery and lifestyle, their harmonious and sustainable ways of living, indigenous practices by tribal healers and medicinal plants can be offered as a unique attraction to the potential visitors. In this process the economic benefits can be reaped by the tribal community. Tourism may act as a motivation (monetary incentive) for cultural preservation and promotion, and can prevent cultural facets from fading into oblivion.

Tribal tourism refers to a form of travel in which tribes allow tourists to experience authentic indigenous life (tribal habitat, heritage, history and handicrafts, culture, values and traditions) by allowing the tourists to visit their villages for them to be exposed to a culture completely different from their own. In India, this concept is in its nascent stages but it is popular in countries like Ethiopia, Kenya in Africa; Ecuador, Peru, Brazil in South America, etc. Ethnic tourism, tribal tourism, indigenous tourism, rural tourism, eco-tourism, nature based tourism, agri-tourism, community based tourism, responsible tourism are few terminologies which are all closely aligned and used in academia to explain the concept of travel to tribal areas. These concepts are a part of the wider umbrella of Alternative Tourism which in essence means tourism activities or development that are viewed as non-traditional, often defined in opposition to large-scale mass tourism to represent small-scale sustainable tourism developments.



A widely accepted perspective is that ethnic tourism has multiple benefits, such as cultural/identity revival and socio-economic, and sometimes even political gains for local minority residents (Adams 2003). In the year 2018, Ministry of Tourism (MoT), Government of India (GoI) inaugurated the project 'Development of Tribal Circuit in Chhattisgarh' implemented under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme (SDS) of MoT, in Gangrel, Chhattisgarh. It was the first Tribal Circuit Project under SDS. Construction of its first phase in Vananchal region of the state got completed in 2022 at the cost of Rs. 94.23 crore. Jashpur, marked for tribal tourism circuit under SDS, has been developed as an ethnic tourism village. Ethnic tourism village at Sarodha Dadar, Eco-Ethnic Tourist Destination at Gangrel, Route Facilitation Centre at Nathianwagaon, Ethnic Tourist Village at Kondagaon, Ethnic Tourist Destination at Jagdalpur, Eco-Ethnic Tourist Destination at Chitrakoot and Eco-Ethnic Tourist Destination at Tirathgarh have been developed. SDS (launched in 2014 -15) is a scheme of MoT for development of thematic circuits in the country in a planned manner.

In a year 2021, a document of MoT titled 'National Strategy and Road Map for Development of Rural Tourism in India - An Initiative towards AatmaNirbhar Bharat', the SWOT (strength-weakness-opportunity-threat) analysis of rural tourism in India mentions, "apart from the mainland rural areas, India has coastal, Himalayan, desert, forest and tribal areas amongst others for tourists". Further it suggests the states of India to identify clusters of villages having high potential for tourism development on various sub themes which also includes "unique tribal culture".

### Tribal Tourism and Museum Development in Uttar Pradesh: Tharu Tribe

Tharu Tribal community lives in the Terai (foothills of the Himalayas) lowlands. Terai area is quite fertile. The districts of Uttar Pradesh lying close to the Nepal border have maximum Tharu tribal population. The Government of Uttar Pradesh has decided to promote tribal tourism in the regions inhabited by Tharu tribe. This tribal group also has a presence in Nepal, Bihar and Uttarakhand. Tharus are recognised as a Scheduled Tribe in India. Tharu people worship mainly their tribal Goddess (Earth) which they refer to as 'Bhumsen' in their language.

They worship Lord Shiva as Mahadev. They are worshippers of Theravada Buddhism. Maximum people from this tribe work either as forest dwellers or are farmers.

Tharu people plant rice, wheat, mustard, corn, and lentils. They also collect minor food produces from forest like wild fruits, medicinal plants, etc. They hunt deer, rabbit and wild boar and also do fishing. They stay in isolation in their own localities. Their homes, especially the outer walls and verandas are decorated and coloured. Wine made by rice is quite popular in this tribe. Major items on the Tharu plate are *bagiya* or *dhikri* which is a steamed dish of rice flour that is eaten with chutney or curry and *ghonghi*, an edible snail that is cooked in a curry made of coriander, chilli, garlic, and onion.

The Uttar Pradesh Government has started a new scheme to put Tharu villages on the tourism map. The government aims to offer tourists an experience of living in the natural Tharu habitat that contains traditional huts made of materials naturally found in the forest. The aim is to connect Tharu villages in the districts of Balrampur, Bahraich, Lakhimpur and Pilibhit bordering Nepal, with the 'home stay scheme' of the UP Forest Department. With this scheme, Tharu homeowners will be able to charge tourists directly for the accommodation and home-cooked meals. The forest corporation would also provide basic training to Tharu people so that they can communicate aptly with the tourists.

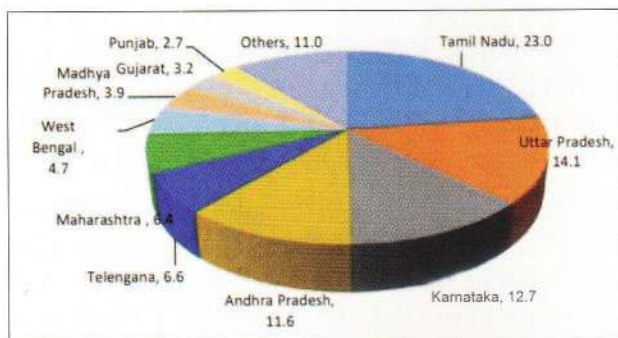
Burman *et al* (2007) states that museums and village cultural centres play an important part in preserving and promoting tribal culture, but unfortunately not much has been done in this area. A good example of a Tribal Museum is the one located at Shillong, namely the Don Bosco Museum, which is the largest of its kind in Asia. Apart from the above initiative, few months ago the official spokesperson of the culture department, U.P government announced that 'Tharu Janjati Museum' will be set up in Imilia Koder Village of Balrampur district which will be the first of its kind in the state. Sonbhadra, Lakhimpur Kheri, and Lucknow districts have also been spotted for the construction of Tribal Museums. Museums are also effective mediums to preserve and promote the cultural facets. There is a huge demand for tribal artifacts, textiles, ornaments, paintings, potteries, cane and bamboo products, and organic and natural food products, but the supply side of this economy is



way below the demand side and thus the community fails to profit from its produce. Promoting tourism in the tribal areas can aid in strengthening the supply side.

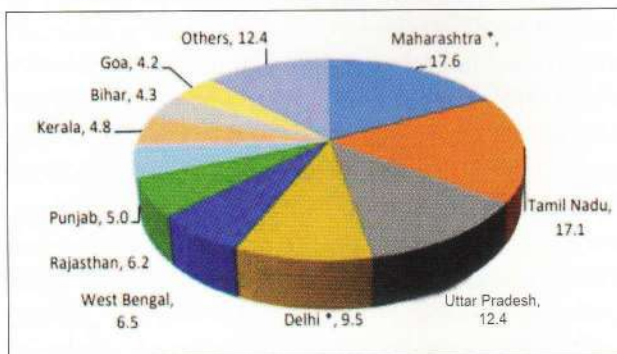
Advantages of tribal tourism include domestic and global propagation of the culture and tradition of the Tharu tribes. The state government says it would help in creating jobs and bring economic independence and advancement in the tribal population. The handicrafts of Tharu tribes will get the buyers through tourism which will create financial opportunities. Statistical data (refer pie chart below) shows that Uttar Pradesh has stood in the top three positions in the list of states ranked in India on the basis of domestic and international tourist arrivals. This footfall would be exposed to a more vibrant basket of tourism offerings in U.P. with Tribal tourism getting added to it. An empowered status of women in tribes, ability to live in sync with nature, role of tribes in climate conservation, waste management techniques, sustainable food practices (majority of them) are few facets of their culture which can attract and mesmerise the tourists.

**Figure 1. Percentage Share of Top 10 States/UTs in Domestic Tourist Visits in 2020**



Source: India Tourism Statistics 2021, MoT, GoI

**Figure 2. Share of Top 10 States/UTs in India in Number of Foreign Tourist Visits in 2020**



Source: India Tourism Statistics 2021, MoT, GoI

## Conclusion

The tribal economy is mainly concentrated around the collection and processing of minor forest products and cultivation largely for the purpose of domestic consumption. They usually struggle to meet their economic needs with a bare minimum income. It is a proven fact that tourism empowers the host population economically. Tourism development in the destinations characterised by indigenous people, where the visitors are prepared to 'travel responsibly', will pave the way for preservation and protection of tribal heritage in a sustainable way. Tribal tourism can act as an instrument of economic development and employment generation particularly in tribal districts. Tribal tourism can play an important and effective role in achieving the growth with equity which is very essential for sustainable development. The guiding policy making principle should be that tourism can't be a compensation for non-development of tribes; it should be a wilfully opted supplement by the tribal community.

Understanding of tribal destination image and perceptions of visitors is very critical to region and provide the basis for more effective and efficient future strategic planning for tribal tourism development. There is need of capacity building for local tribal community members in terms of tour guiding, hospitality and tour operations for tourism to become more participative. There is need of public private partnership for tourism infrastructure development in the tribal region and also the sustainability concern of tribal areas is to be given due emphasis. The most fundamental premise of ensuring success of using tourism as a means to preserve and promote tribal heritage is to consider opinion of tribal community and their participation in planning and development of tribal tourism at each and every stage of tourism development. Mohanty (2007) suggests that inviting participation of the tribal people not only at the implementing level but also in the designing of tourism is the key. Local people should be encouraged and expected to undertake leadership role in planning and development with the assistance of government and business enterprises.

With Ms. Droupadi Murmu being elected as the President of India, the first president from the



tribal (Santhal) community, there can't be a bigger watershed moment to holistically address tribal concerns in India in a multidimensional manner.

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