

# Endogenous development and tribal worldviews: Working with tribal communities in India

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## Introduction

IDEA is a research and development organisation working with the tribal communities in North Eastern Ghats, India, since 1987. IDEA's interaction with COMPAS and its systematic support to endogenous development started in 1996 with a documentation of tribal worldviews and indigenous knowledge. It initiated a participatory action research programme for the revival and enhancement of relevant and significant indigenous knowledges and related worldviews to promote endogenous development in the tribal communities.

The Eastern Ghats is the homeland of about 65 tribal communities with a population of 11.5 million people. These tribal communities live in inaccessible mountain and forest areas with diverse cultural practices and related worldviews. They have indigenous knowledge systems with well-knit traditional village councils and functionaries.

Tribals believe in the existence of human, nature and spiritual worlds and the continuous interaction between these three worlds is well established and maintained. The tribal belief in the existence of a spiritual world and its influence on their daily life is their age-old animistic philosophy. Indeed, their strong belief in the influence of a spiritual world and divine beings (of both benevolent and malevolent natures) is the main basis for their sustainable livelihood activities. This is predominantly seen in all the tribal communities in the Eastern Ghats, where tribals propitiate the spiritual world and the divine beings of human origin, natural origin and supernatural origin through rituals, ceremonies and festivals to get blessings in the form of good social lives, health, harvests and so on and also to ward off problems (diseases, pests and so forth). The traditional village institutional functionaries, known as *Dhisari*, *Poojari*, *Gunitya* and *Gurumayi*, are spiritual and magical religious people and act as the communicators between the communities and the divine spirits.

Tribal worldview practices are always integrated with indigenous knowledge and every ritual/festival has its own rationality. These development-oriented worldview practices and indigenous knowledge are the cultural mechanisms of the tribal communities. The animistic philosophies form the basis for evolution and socio-cultural identities. Tribal community life is always based on these customs, worldviews, traditions and related practices and taboos.

## Significant worldviews

IDEA has prioritized some of the significant tribal indigenous knowledge and related worldviews for revival and it has integrated the experiences with endogenous development in these sectors. IDEA has selected four worldview-related practices: the soil testing festival (Bali Parob); ceremonies for seed testing and traditional natural resource management (clan totems and sustainable harvesting practices) (Chaitra parob); crop health-related rituals (Ashad Jatra); and food security-related ceremonies (Nuakiya). Table 1 summarizes some of the main aspects of these festivals and rituals.

Festival/ritual/ ceremony	Significance	
	Physical	Cosmovision
Bali Parob	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soil testing based on the colour, size and appearance of the germinated seeds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sacred cosmic powers for the soil for vitality and health</li> </ul>
Chaitra Parob	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seed testing based on the quantity of germinated seeds</li> <li>• Protection of clan totems and harvesting techniques through songs during ceremonial hunting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sacred cosmic powers for seed and for good crop fertility with cosmic powers</li> </ul>
Ashad Jatra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pest control by prescribing and demonstration of specific botanical pesticides</li> <li>• Advise to farmers on cattle and human health by traditional healers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sacred cosmic powers and immunity for crops against diseases</li> </ul>
Nuakiya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conservation of food grains and forest products for food security (touching and eating the produce from the farm/wild without celebrating the ritual is a taboo)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sacred blessings of the ancestral spirits of human nature for sustainability of food security</li> </ul>

Table 1 The significance of selected festivals and rituals

## Revival and revitalization efforts

IDEA has successfully revived these significant worldviews and indigenous knowledge in the tribal belts of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa in North Eastern Ghats. This has helped the farmers not only to regain lost knowledge, but also to integrate modern knowledge with the traditional in order to promote endogenous development.

Validated and efficacy tested worldviews and indigenous knowledge systems are being further documented and assessed with internal and external criterias through sensitive documentation and assessments. A strategy and methodology has been developed to understand ontology and worldview, gnoseology (rationalities) and related practices and their epistemologies.

More diverse, area- and community-specific and heterogeneous practices have been observed with similar rationalities in different communities. Most of the physical inputs, such as soil testing, seed testing mechanisms and pest control practices, have been correlated with Ayurvedic guna and modern pharmacological compound properties. More in-depth studies are being carried out by IDEA.

### *A holistic approach*

Problems with conventional approaches to development have inspired IDEA to work in a different way, looking for ways to facilitate endogenous development that emphasize active participation, build on local experiences and institutions, and blend these with modern elements. Its approach, which grew out of close interaction with the communities, consists of four main stages.

When entering a new community, IDEA starts by building up a relationship with individuals. Case studies, group discussions and building relations with traditional leaders follow. We encourage and participate in cultural programmes with our own songs related to peoples' history, culture and festivals, their ancestors, clan totems and environment. This attracts immediate attention and creates emotional participation and physical integration. Extensive dialogue is held with community leaders on the interconnectedness of the natural world, human world and spiritual world.

IDEA believes that participatory, people-focused and indigenous knowledge-driven programmes are essential components for all development interventions. Proper consideration of local values, customs, practices, resources and institutions is the main pillar in this development process. Judicious blending of these components with elements of modern development is one of the philosophical principles of endogenous development. This is especially vital in the tribal areas where a rapid transition is taking place.

The Eastern Ghats are experiencing severe ecological destruction. In the past, tribal societies used several regulatory mechanisms to manage the environment and control the effects of shifting cultivation. Today, indiscriminate felling of trees as part of modernization has resulted in deforestation, denuded soils, reduced ground water and virtual disappearance of traditional crops. The tribal people themselves are being pushed deeper into the remote areas and so into marginalization. With their general low awareness of the value of money, they are easily victimized by traders. Interaction with non-tribals is leading to an increasing loss of identity and is giving rise to aspirations that are difficult to fulfil.

The main development programmes, such as those introduced by the government, have ignored the existing tribal institutions and knowledge and the role they play in natural resources management.

### *The role of the clan totems*

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. 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.

### *Emotional integration*

IDEA works with a more formal process, the objective of which is to strengthen community feeling. We call this element emotional integration and it is central to the IDEA methodology. IDEA believes that emotional integration of communities must take place before initiating any kind of development activity. There is a systematic pattern whereby the community is nurtured through a series of practices that the people understand, enjoy and identify with, thus building a strong emotional bond within the community. By reviving traditional cultural practices, songs, dances, festivals and systems of education that have the potential to strengthen their identity, IDEA brings them together around a common agenda.

### *Techniques for promoting emotional integration*

Different techniques are used to promote this process in the target groups. The different tribal communities have diverse forms of indigenous knowledge, worldviews, habitats, customs and language for addressing a common problem, whether related to health, nutrition or agriculture. It is important to talk to these communities about human, cultural, tribal and socio-political developments in a form of language that is relevant to them (emotional content). This might include using stories, songs or pictorial presentations. Thus the members of the community can create a perception that is meaningful and also helps them to realize (emotional realization) that although they may be from different other ethnic or linguistic groups, they come from a single homogenous social race and their common problems can be tackled through community social action. This helps to promote or revive tribal cultural identity, which can be the basis for building up their tribal solidarities (emotional involvement).

An eco-restoration or biodiversity conservation programme, for example, that includes emotional integration and realization starts from traditional tribal nature resource management practices and indigenous knowledge related to ecology. Short simple lectures are given during group and village meetings. Examples and evidence from the community are discussed, and explanations of the meaning of the songs are given. We try to (re-)establish relationships between customs, norms, festivals, environment and animistic religious practices. This enhances people's confidence in their practices. The community feeling is strengthened in their minds and hearts. All people, including the traditional leaders, participate in the programme.

## Planning and implementation of development activities

The third stage of IDEA's work includes organizing activity-based groups and helping them to set a common agenda. This may involve experimenting with sustainable technologies, documenting local practices, or reviving cultural practices. It is at this

level that we make sure that the local knowledge systems interact with outside practices.

For example, traditional herbalists receive training in documenting their local practices, and at the same time learn about allopathic first aid. Traditional birth attendants receive training in mother and childcare, immunization and nutritional improvements. Environmental protection and development groups (EPDGs) are established and work out plans for integrating their ecology-related cultural festivals and their natural resource base. Village-based women's groups are organized with involvement of their traditional leaders, for example, to enter into savings and thrift programmes.

## Consolidation

The fourth stage includes leadership building, networking and lobbying. A key strategy in IDEA's approach is to work with the tribal leaders, assist them in reviewing their roles in the present context and in organizing themselves. As a result of this work in the various communities, the Naik Gotna (Network of Tribal Leaders) network was established in 1998. This network organizes various activities that benefit the tribal population as a whole. For example, hundreds of representatives of the various tribal groups and their traditional leaders joined the yearly festivals organized by the Naik Gotna network. These frequent festivals provide a platform for traditional leaders to exchange and demonstrate their knowledge, practices and experiments. They create space for intercultural dialogues and for strengthening networking between different tribal communities to promote endogenous development.

## Transforming a hunting ceremony for natural resource management in India

In the Eastern Ghats of India, many people still engage in their traditional hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation practices. Despite influences of modernity, tribal societies still observe community social and ecological controls in making use of their natural resources, based on their totems and the associated taboos. For example, they conserve the species and surroundings of their clan totem, such as the peacock or the barking deer. IDEA uses these cultural practices as an important starting point in the search for ways to halt the degeneration of both the environment and the tribals' way of life.

### *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. 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 tribals as people who destroy the forests and indiscriminately kill animals.

IDEA started an environmental project based on EPDGs. These groups developed a strategy based on discussions with traditional leaders and older tribals. A meeting the participants identified the declining number of plants and animals and the deteriorating environmental situation, as well as the generation gap that affects the care and knowledge of the natural environment. It was during this meeting that the idea grew that the traditional hunting ceremony Ittukala Panduga could be transformed into a celebration of natural resources. The decision was made jointly to try and do this with the overall aim of protecting nature and perpetuating the customary living style.

First, courses were organized 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. At the start in 1988, 40 villages took part, and now more than 1,000 villages in four states participate. The membership of the EPDGs has risen from a small number of families to 35,000 families. While the executive committees in each village are responsible for this activity, IDEA assists in recording and documenting the information.

### *Resource inventories as part of the new ceremony*

The villagers divide themselves into four subgroups based on age, sex and vocation. At the usual time of the ceremony, 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 trees, 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 recorded. Youth acquainted with the village economy and the resources required for the material well-being 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 from among its members. Each member's findings are discussed by the group and observations are recorded systematically.

### *Rituals, sharing and planning*

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 relates its findings on 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 EPDGs also decide on future activities. There has been considerable improvement in the status of the 50 species on the endangered list. Enforcement of conservation measures is effective since the norms have community support and sanction.

IDEA's work has led to the resource inventory concept being revived as a customary practice, where tribals have re-embraced the idea of assessing natural resources and sustainable harvesting practices during ceremonial hunting. The attitude of tribal youth has changed towards natural resource assessment and shifted away from the hunting of wild animals. Although hunting has not completely stopped, the protection of clan totems has now been substantially revived.

## Building a network of tribal leaders and experts in India

The tribal communities in the Eastern Ghats in India live and work dispersed over a large area. Though they have a lot in common in terms of their cultural and livelihood strategies, they have tended to organize themselves independently, leading to a great variety of locally specific expressions of culture and ways of making a living. Through their work with IDEA, leaders in the various communities have not only started to realize what they have in common, but also realize the benefits of collaborating when organizing development efforts, in particular activities to improve their livelihoods. This led them to set-up the Naik Gotna network. The major objective of the network is to form a strong group of tribal leaders to support the endogenous development process of their communities. The traditional village institutional functionaries have realized the importance of networking for endogenous development and IDEA has facilitated the process. Naik Gotna has organized several training programmes for tribal youth on endogenous development and has facilitated community experiments on agro-ecological, health and nutritional aspects in the last few years, with the support of IDEA. Naik Gotna has also initiated farmers' research stations at community level to support young farmers with on-farm experiments, and to involve them in documentation and exercises to revive traditional knowledge and practices.

From the small group of initiators the network has now grown and the present Naik Gotna is a state-level federation of different district level thematic forums (*samakya*) of traditional institutional functionaries. The objective is that different state-level Naik Gotnas will federate at national level to form the Tribal Endogenous Development Network. The district-level thematic forums are envisaged as informal bodies with independent executive committees and endogenous development

programmes. Naik Gotna will be more formal, with an executive committee and statutes. It is in the process of developing its own administrative structures for effective functioning as a community-based network.

### *Results become clear*

The first Indigenous Knowledge Mela in 2001, organized by Naik Gotna, is a clear example of the network's growing strength. It was able to bring together people across the main different communities and for four days, hundreds of representatives exhibited a wide range of traditional practices, medicinal plants and rituals, and several workshops were organized. The major objective of this event was to provide a platform for the tribal communities to exchange and demonstrate their knowledge, practices and experiments. The event created a platform for networking between different tribal communities, but it also provided an opportunity to show the relevance of tribal indigenous knowledge to local policy makers and administrators.

Though the starting point of the IDEA activities in the Eastern Ghats has been natural resources management, Naik Gotna is addressing many other themes, such as agricultural innovations, herbal medical practices for humans, animals and crops, and the production and preparation of wild leafy vegetables with high nutritional value. These practices are being experimented within the communities; the results are documented by the IDEA staff and exchanged during meetings.

The increasing strength of Naik Gotna has not gone unnoticed. The traditional leaders themselves experience great satisfaction. Gollori Sadu, one of these leaders notes:

We started three or four years ago; it was our own idea based on our own experiences. Now we are very big, some 5,000 traditional leaders from 400 villages, from many communities! We want to show everybody who we are and what we know, because we need the cooperation of various organizations.

### *Challenges*

Though the Mela was very successful, it was not easy to organize this major event. According to Gollori Sadu, 'The Indigenous Knowledge Mela has been very good, but it has been difficult to mobilize and handle so many people. Especially to arrange for them to go back to their homes; we have to take care of everyone!'

Naik Gotna is emerging as a strong community-based regional network through its local thematic forums. The shape that these forums should take is a big challenge to Naik Gotna and IDEA. The thematic forums seek to join hands with the traditional healers in the rural areas for intercultural dialogue, exchange of information and knowledge systems. This is a dynamic field, where tribals may seek cautious coalitions to promote endogenous development while keeping their cultural identities intact. In the future, modern political elements may enter the forums and Naik Gotna federations if they are not moulded cautiously and strategically. With sufficient resources Naik Gotna should be able to facilitate the necessary training and provide logistical support. Plans for the mobilization of resources need to be developed. Another major challenge for Naik Gotna is to facilitate the thematic forums to codify and theorize their folk knowledge by documenting and doing research.