

# AMONG THE ADIVASI

Minority tribes in India struggle to preserve culture and traditions amid the march to modernity. Story and photos by **Saniya More** in Tamkhind, Maharashtra state



An Adivasi woman returns from the streams with water for her family in Tamkhind.

My eyes struggle to capture everything around me as quickly as I possibly can. I register the lush green rice fields and small brown huts scattered over a small expanse of land as I get out of the car. It's unusually quiet, but not in a bad way. I whip out my camera, almost on impulse. I feel as if I have stepped into another world.

I am in a small part of Tamkhind, a village in Palghar district of Maharashtra state in India. I am here to document the Adivasis who live here — most are from the Varli tribal group — and learn more about how they survive and thrive.

Adivasi is a name collectively used to describe the indigenous people in India. A modern Sanskrit term coined in the 1930s, it consists of two words: *adi*, meaning from the beginning, and *vasi* meaning inhabitant. At the last Indian census in 2011, the country was home to 104 million Adivasis, accounting for 8.6% of the country's population.

The Adivasi consist of 200 indigenous, tribal groups in all, with communities located in various states, including Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar. The particular village I am visiting has a population of around 4,500 people, according to Sunil Parhad, an Adivasi medical officer in a government hospital in Palghar, who is my tour guide.

As we walk around the hamlet, Mr Parhad tells me about the Adivasi way of living. According to him, every village has an open place of worship.

"The Adivasis only worship what they can see," he says. For this reason, they draw a sun, moon and tiger in a designated place, all symbols of nature. "How long can

we go on with our faith? Our land is God for us, it is how we survive," he points out.

Prior to visiting Tamkhind, I spoke with Kirti Vartha, a social worker with Adivasi Shramik Mahila Mandal and Adivasi Ekta Parishad, two groups that work closely with indigenous communities on the local and national levels.

Each Adivasi tribe has its own set of rules and regulations for everything, including prices for goods and services, Ms Vartha explains to me during an interview at her house.

Adivasi are not part of the Hindu caste system, although some have attached themselves to caste groups based on occupation or other factors. Caste Hindus tend not to regard Adivasis as unclean, in contrast to prevailing attitudes toward Dalits

(untouchables), but Adivasi do continue to face prejudice.

One other noteworthy attribute that tends to set Adivasi apart from caste-based Indians is gender equality, Ms Vartha says.

"In other communities [in India], Brahmins usually have a lot of authority, especially when it comes to marriage. But Adivasis believe women have more authority," she explains.

Brahmins — normally teachers, doctors, scholars or religious persons in the past — were the highest and powerful of the four *varnas*, or social classes, in Hinduism.

But Adivasi women, according to Ms Vartha, can officiate marriages, seek divorces, and do not have to follow a monetary dowry system, just an exchange of rice, vegetables and other edible goods.

Her thoughts are echoed by Mr Parhad, who lists honesty and tolerance as factors that set the Adivasi apart from other communities. This is especially notable in how village councils deal with criminals. If a man commits murder, he isn't hanged or jailed. Instead, he has to take responsibility for the family of the person whose life he took, Mr Parhad says.

As we continue walking around, I take a series of photographs. A few women carry large pots of water on their heads, and some look away shyly when I aim my lens at them. There do not appear to be any men around. Mr Parhad tells me most of them are at work, either in the fields or at manual labour.

One woman, who has just returned from the water hole with her two children, disappears into her hut when she sees me. Her children stay outside and watch me intently. I point my lens at them. They stay still, making direct eye contact. They are unafraid.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

As I walk along further, I strike up a conversation with an older woman who is tending a rice field. Her name is Anusaya Padavale. She spends most of her day outdoors, collecting wood and taking care of the house.

I follow her to a larger hut where a group of women are sitting. Some of them eye the camera in my hand warily, and I put it back into my bag. I speak with them in Marathi and discover that they lead difficult and busy lives just to make ends meet.

"Who will feed us if we don't work? If we don't work, we will go hungry," Pramila Padavale, one of the women, tells me. "But we are happy."

Like many minority communities,

the Adivasi are no strangers to a slowly fading culture.

"I teach my own two girls the basic skills every Adivasi person should know, like speaking their Varli language. They should know how to climb trees and mountains, they should treat men and women equally without any assumptions," Ms Vartha says as she shows me a picture of her family.

**"New construction and developments are destroying nature, which in turn disrupts the Adivasi community"**

SANJANA MANKAR  
Tamkhind village council head

Not all traditions and perspectives survive into the next generation of some families. According to Ms Vartha, she is one of the few who still tries to instill her community's values in her children. More Adivasi have integrated into Indian mainstream society, losing themselves in the process, she says.

Mr Parhad has a similar viewpoint, and says that although many Adivasi prioritise fitting into society, they face challenges in doing so, primarily because of how others view them.

"People don't focus on who the Adivasi

are as a people. They only see them as farmers who have no culture, who resort to alcohol to survive," he says. There should be a specialised form of education that connects the Adivasi with their heritage and teaches them basic survival skills beyond the textbook, he adds.

Our conversation is cut short as we hear loud construction machines in the distance. Palghar, where Tamkhind is located, has seen a lot of development since 2014 when the district was officially formed.

Because of this, it has been harder for the Adivasi community to preserve their land. People in Tamkhind have felt mounting pressure to relocate or change their lifestyle, according to Sanjana Mankar, the head of the village council.

"Destruction is happening in the name of development," she says. "New construction and developments are destroying nature, which in turn disrupts the Adivasi community."

As we talk, it begins to rain and the women gather their children quickly, bringing them into the little huts scattered around the hamlet. A political sign is tacked against a wall in the office we are sitting in. "We are the government in our village. The forest, land and water belong to our people," it reads in Marathi.

The Adivasi do indeed share a close bond and live in harmony with the nature around them. They embody a rich and unique culture, but are often looked down upon because they are seen as a backward, low-income and uneducated fragment of Indian society.

Despite their isolated place in society, they spend each day to the best of their abilities. They may not have it all, but that doesn't stop them from living.



Two Adivasi children mug for the camera.

## INDIAN STARTUP ENGINEERS THRIVING URBAN FORESTS

By Anuradha Sharma in Bengaluru

Close to a diesel locomotive shed at Krishnarajapura in eastern Bengaluru, a dense forest of 2,000 trees is growing.

Huddled together in just 600 square metres, the 10-month-old trees have an average height of 1.8 metres. But this is no ordinary forest. The man-made urban jungle is the creation of Afforestt, a local social enterprise that uses techniques pioneered by the Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki to restore lost forest cover. "Another year or so and the forest can be left to fend for itself," said Shubhendu Sharma, founder and director of Afforestt. "Once it is dense enough to prevent sunlight from reaching the ground, it will not even need watering. It is a self-sustaining, zero-maintenance, fully native forest."

Despite its image as India's garden city, green cover in the southern metropolis formerly known as Bangalore declined from

68% of its total urban area in 1973 to 23% in 2012, according to a study by the Indian Institute of Science and the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board.

"There should have been eight trees per person, and what we have now is one tree per seven persons," said Srinivasan P, a senior engineer at the South Western Railway locomotive shed who looks after the greening.

"Unlike our other afforestation projects, which are spread over a big area, Afforestt's forest, being concentrated in a smaller area, is easier to maintain," Srinivasan said. "Given the progress it has already made in terms of growth, it does not seem we will have to wait very long to get a fully grown forest."

In collaboration with SayTrees, a local tree-planting group, the project is funded by Mercedes-Benz as part of its corporate

social responsibility programme.

Afforestt has created 98 Miyawaki-style forests in 34 cities in India, Pakistan, Kenya, the Netherlands, Iran, Singapore and the United States, planting 357,690 trees. It is close to signing a deal for its 100th project. Like the development in Bengaluru, many were commissioned as part of corporate social responsibility programmes. Clients have included Cisco, Polaris Industries, Samsonite International, Tata Chemicals and Larsen & Toubro.

## WHEELS TO TREES

Sharma, 32, was an industrial engineer at Toyota Kirloskar, a local Toyota Motor subsidiary, when he attended a lecture by Miyawaki in Bengaluru. "Once I heard him, I was completely fascinated by his work," said Sharma. "In that half an hour, I made up my mind."

A 2006 recipient of the Blue Planet Prize, an award created by the Asahi Glass Foundation for environmental achievement, Miyawaki has restored indigenous forests in 600 locations in Japan and several hundred more abroad. He has created native forests at many of Toyota's 26 factories worldwide and came to Bengaluru to start a forest to mark the local plant's 10th anniversary.

Sharma volunteered to join Miyawaki's team to learn techniques and gain experience. In June 2009, he helped Miyawaki set up a forest at the Toyota plant in Bidadi, 30km southwest of Bengaluru. He also created his own forest at his family home in the Himalayan resort town of Nainital with 224 trees of 42 species in a 75-square-metre plot.

Buoyed by his successes, Sharma launched Afforestt in early 2011, seeking to use the principles of assembly line organisation to improve the environment.

"I applied these manufacturing principles to forests, replacing cars with trees, to develop an algorithm that registers specific parameters of trees — their height, flowering times, what kind of temperatures they can tolerate," he said. "The car-assembly logic helps us pick an ideal combination of trees to best utilise vertical space."

His methods are centred on two main rules: Plants must be indigenous and soil management must never be compromised. Only "climax species", or plants that have remained unchanged for 1,000 years, are planted.

"These forests can even grow in rocks," said Sharma. "We have created a verdant forest even in the barren soil of Rajasthan. All the soil needs is the right kind of treatment, and we have a detailed soil management plan in place for that."

To plant in barren soil, Afforestt adds manure to enhance nutrition, fruit and seed shells to enable roots to penetrate more deeply, crushed sugarcane fibre to help roots retain water, a slurry of cow dung and urine, cane sugar and the flour of pulses to enhance microbial activity, and a thin mulch of grass and rice straw.

With the idea of 100% utilisation of vertical space, the forests are multi-layered, with plants ranging from herbs to canopy trees planted according to the maximum height they can reach in their lifetimes.

Sharma said that Miyawaki forests are 30 times denser and grow to maturity 10 times



Shubhendu Sharma founded Afforestt after being inspired by a speech by Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki.

faster than ordinary plantations because the close planting allows several stages of forest development to be skipped.

Once the trees have grown sufficiently to prevent sunlight from breaking through the crowns, the forest becomes self-sustaining because rainwater does not evaporate and is retained in the ground. The moist forest floor helps leaves to decay faster.

"Thirty times more photosynthesis means 30 times more oxygen," said Sharma. "The roots, too, run much deeper than they would in ordinary plantations, and form a complex network that holds the soil firmly together. So these forests work wonderfully as natural barriers against natural calamities like flooding and storms."

Afforestt is now setting its goals higher with "forestscaping", a new end-to-end service aimed at making urban forests into

recreation centres. This involves combining afforestation with landscaping and art, usually in the form of permanent outdoor installations. The company's pilot project in Lahore, Pakistan, was a 3,000-square-metre "wellness" park inside a residential area, with running tracks and seats in the forest.

Professional forest management, said Sharma, is needed to restore and protect natural resources. "We cannot rely solely on volunteers to match the devastation caused on an industrial scale."

But Sharma's main motivation comes from being able to give people the experience of a dense forest without having to leave the city. "I believe people should love forests in order to protect them, not be driven by fear or greed," he said.

Children and other community members lend a hand to plant 600 saplings for a Miyawaki-style forest at the Singapore Zoo.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AFFORESTT

PHOTO: ANURADHA SHARMA