



THE STRUGGLES OF TODAY'S FOREST-DWELLING TRIBAL GENERATIONS



The sun dipped low in the sky, casting long shadows over the barren hill where trees once stood tall and proud. Soma squatted on the hardened earth, her gnarled fingers tracing patterns in the dust. The memories flickered like dying embers in her mind, warm but distant. She could almost hear the laughter of her childhood friends, calling her name—"Soma! Soma!"—as they raced through the forest, their feet pounding the soft, mossy ground. The scent of cut leaves and wet wood filled the air, the sweetness of little berries bursting on her tongue as she plucked them from the bushes. They would climb trees, her small hands gripping the rough bark, legs swinging with the thrill of it all, until they reached the highest branches where the forbidden fruits waited. Soma could still feel the cool stream of water slipping through her fingers as she filled her clay pot, the sunlight dancing on the surface, turning it into liquid gold.



That forest is now a ghost, gliding over barren land and a lone road that cuts through it like a scar. The children's laughter was gone, replaced by the distant rumble of passing trucks and the dry, choking dust they left behind. Soma's oldest son trudged home, his body bent from a day of backbreaking work at Sheth's rice farm, his face etched with lines of fatigue. Her youngest, who used to perpetually be in song, had taken a quiet job in the city. Now, the only sound that left his lips was a harsh, rattling cough that worried her more than she let on.

Soma's stomach growled, reminding her that it wasn't yet dinner time. She glanced at the meager pile of grain in the corner, knowing it had to stretch to feed all nine of them. The memory of those red, juicy berries made her mouth water, but they were long gone, like so much else. She squinted at the horizon, where the trees once lined the periphery of the forest, shielding them from the world beyond. Now, it was nothing but dry, cracked earth and a few scraggly trees clinging to life.

The sky, once so generous with its rain, had turned its back on them. She wondered if her ancestors wept to see their land like this, and if they did, why didn't the heavens open and cry with them? She thought of her oldest grandchild, a bright young man who had left for the city. Was he eating well? Sleeping enough? Would he, too, forget the ways of the jungle, the stories of their people, and the songs that once filled the air?

Her vision blurred as the tears she hadn't allowed herself to shed finally broke free, rolling down her weathered cheeks. How would she ever face her ancestors, knowing the world they had cherished was slipping away?



There was a risk of reducing this edition to a voyeuristic portrayal of suffering. But the realities are too critical to ignore, warranting this focused edition in commemoration of the International Day of World's Indigenous People (August 9th) and International Youth Day (August 12th).

This is the story of hundreds of forest-dwelling communities – landless, illiterate, poverty-stricken, food and water insecure all exacerbated by climate change and rapid ill-planned urbanisation. Their entire lives were within forests – taking just what was needed for survival while protecting, worshipping and celebrating the genesis of all that surrounded them. Tribal youth are expected to suddenly discard centuries of old traditional lives and adapt to the fast-paced nature of urban life, while having been systemically poor, uneducated and malnourished.

Their lives do not magically transform into comfortable ones when they must inevitably migrate to cities. Without education, they must toil in slums in sub-par living conditions for daily wages that are worth less than peanuts. With education, the scenario is still sub-optimal. Tribal students in residential schools and colleges live and eat in poor conditions with no functioning toilets and pest-infested kitchens without blankets during winter. Moreover, they face caste-based discrimination – one instance was an educational institution justifying worms and insects in food by remarking that tribals are habituated to eating them.



Faced with such insurmountable hardships and surrounded by glimpses of success – expensive smartphones, clothes, jewellery and moreover, love – propagated through entertainment media, tribal youth are at a high risk of entering crime. When one has been subjected to systemic injustices and social inequality, there is a high likelihood of taking fate into one's own hands – by hook or crook, a dynamic closely similar to that of Native American youth.



Despite adversities, there have been hopeful signs. Due to the proximity to difficult terrain and physically demanding jobs, tribal youth have an untapped potential in sports. Sainath Pardhi, a 17-year-old belonging to the Pardhi Adivasis who are among the poorest and most deprived of Schedule Tribes, won a bronze medal at the 2024 World Wrestling Championships, bringing India its first medal in this category. One of our field staff visited a tribal village to find a boy working hard at chopping wood. They were stunned to see a wall full of medals, 70 in number, belonging to the boy who won them at various sports competitions.

This edition's objective is not to simply recount the hardships faced by these communities but to inspire action. As readers, we are not powerless. Whether through raising awareness, supporting organizations working on the ground, or advocating for fairer policies, we can help build a future where these youth have the opportunities, they deserve without being forced to leave behind everything they hold dear.

Let us remember that progress should not come at the cost of cultural erasure or systemic neglect. By recognizing the strength, resilience, and potential of tribal youth, we take the first step in ensuring they have the future they deserve—one where they can thrive without losing their identity. Together, we can bridge the gap between their world and ours.

By Sunidhi Hegde

EVENT ALERT

Spend a day in our forests as we show you around our conservatory!
Raah Foundation will be organising a fundraising trek to one of our re-wilding sites in Nashik, Maharashtra.

Date: 21st - 22nd September
Cost: ₹15,000/- per head.

To know more, contact us at:
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TO REGISTER NOW:

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This event's goal is to raise ₹15 Lakhs to re-wild barren hills