

PUTTING TRIBALS FIRST

There is need to explore and imitate lifestyles, consumption patterns and health systems of tribal communities, writes Dr R Balasubramaniam

Medhi, a 50-year-old Bettakuruba tribal from the Bandipur forests of Karnataka, was excited. She had just completed a fascinating 10-day journey to visit Jamshedpur in Jharkhand. This was not only the first time that she was travelling anywhere outside the district of Mysuru but was also her first time on a train. She, along with 18 other indigenous people belonging to the Bettakuruba and Jenukuruba tribes, had gone there to participate in "Samvaad", a conclave of indigenous tribals from all over India, organised by Tata Steel.

Her world began and ended in Elachikat-tehadi, a tribal hamlet abutting the Bandipur National Park. She and thousands like her were ousted from their forests due to the formation of the National Park and construction of large reservoirs in the area between 1960 and 1970. She belonged to a generation which was at the crossroads and had little to hold on to. All she had was the fading identity of being an indigenous Bettakuruba and this did not give her much solace.

All this changed with her experience at the Samvaad. Here, she came to realise that she was not alone in this struggle for an identity and an existence. She suddenly found herself in a context, where being a tribal was not about being at the receiving end of either exploitation or charity. She not only found a voice but also her esteem amidst hundreds of people like her. Samvaad to her was not just a jamboree, where thousands like her had come together to celebrate. It was an extraordinary four-day event, where her identity was respected, her culture celebrated and, for once, she felt important and visible.

Need to communicate

This was in November of 2015 and her only regret then was that she could not participate as intensely as she wanted to. Though she communicated with her fellow tribals from 20 other states of India with her heart, she was constrained by the

inadequacy of her not being able to speak and understand other tribal languages. It was then that she felt that this event, while being a major milestone for thousands like her, was still inadequate in bringing out her inner thoughts and feelings. She wished that this event could be smaller and she could talk and interact with people who could relate to her and her language more intimately. And she was not disappointed.

Responding to the requests of many of these indigenous people, Tata Steel decided to have smaller events at the regional levels in October. Three such events have been held in Baroda (West), Mysuru (South) and in Shillong (North East). Representatives from those who attended these regional events will now come together at the Samvaad-2016 at Jamshedpur from 15-19 November.

The conclave

The theme of this year conclave will revolve around the Traditional Health Systems of the Indigenous tribals of India. Ever since our Independence, the state and several NGOs, who have been working with these tribal communities, have spent millions of rupees on their development with not much to show. The tribals continue to eke out a marginalised existence and have become collateral damage to large development projects. More than six decades of rapid acculturation and shoddy integration into the mainstream culture has left these communities in confusion. Forest conservation laws that they can neither understand, nor find relevance in, have left them at the crossroads with neither a coping mechanism nor an alternate lifestyle.

Economic and social demands of mainstream culture and life are forcing them to abandon their traditional methods, which kept things simple and sustainable, and adopt more expensive, government and NGO-driven coping strategies which are neither culturally appropriate nor contextually relevant. But amid all this, what gives hope is the fact that their knowledge



and practice of traditional medicine still continues to survive. This traditional wisdom now needs to be recaptured, documented and made available to not only these indigenous communities but to the world at large.

A way of life

Considering the unsustainable path that today's world of healthcare demands, there is a lot to learn and emulate from these indigenous communities. We now need to explore and imitate lifestyles, consumption patterns and health systems that these communities have been practicing from centuries and see how one can effectively blend the benefits of both worlds. The practice of healthcare amid tribals cannot be seen merely as the use of traditional herbs and medicines. It encompassed a way of living and was embedded in their intimate relationship with the forests. Apart from finding herbs and honey that they used in their medicines, the forests forced these people to be physically fit in order to find the food and minor forest produce to sustain themselves and their livelihoods. Healthy foods and healing plants were part of their everyday diet and they believed that all "food is medicine" and all "medicine is food".

The traditional medicine-man had an in-depth knowledge of herbs that he used, but cultural beliefs limited him from sharing it with others, especially the non-tribals. One must also keep in mind the fact that these traditional health systems operated and served the needs of these people in a particular context. Today, their world has undergone huge changes and they are in a situation wherein mainstream medical care is rapidly overrunning their fragile systems. It is now that this Samvaad, with its focus on their traditional health systems holds special meaning. Apart from making their practices and knowledge visible, it will also serve to enhance their esteem and self-belief. More importantly, it will let the rest of the world and our indigenous brethren know that they have a rich and knowledgeable past and it would be in their best interests to rediscover their strengths and traditional wisdom.

The writer is a physician, development activist and the founder of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement. He has lived and worked with indigenous tribal communities in Karnataka for nearly 30 years and can be reached at drrbalu@gmail.com