



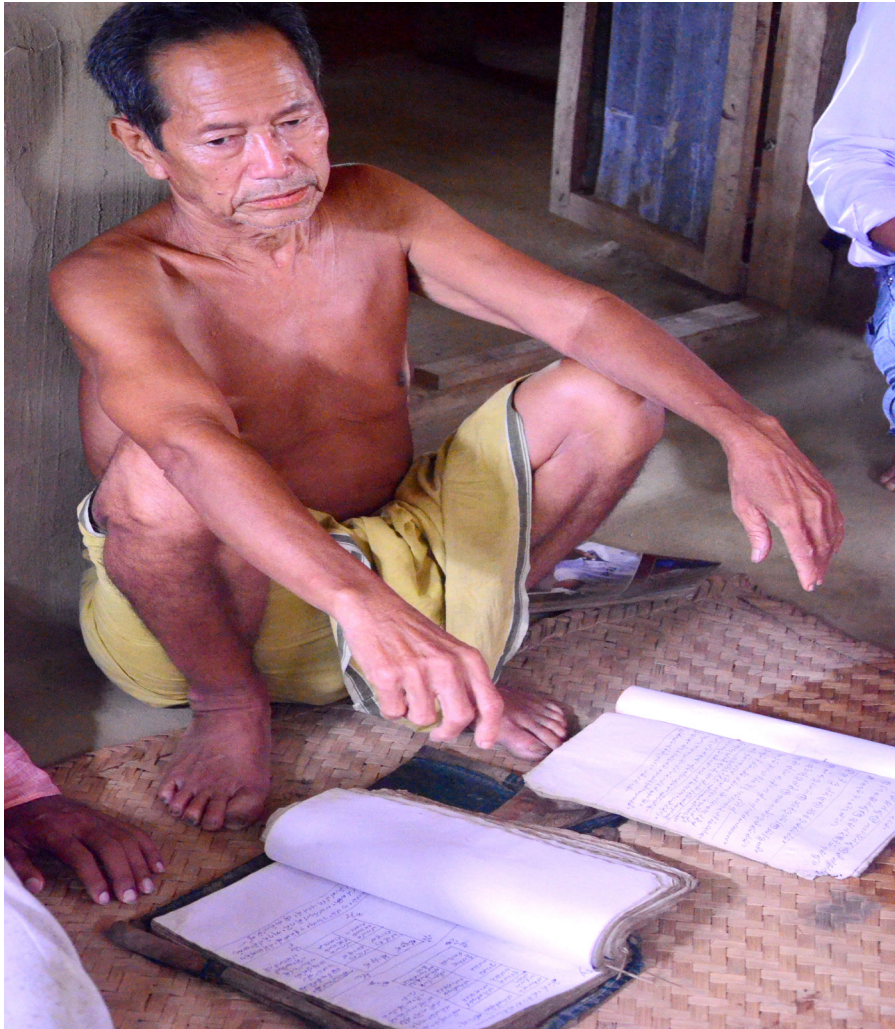
In the land of Chakmas: Colours, creativity and conservation

Walking in a tribal region having one of the highest educational coverage and attainment in the country was a revealing experience. Though at a geographically disadvantaged location, Tripura beat Kerala in literacy percentage in 2013. It is not surprising that numerous private schools open in summer for children. But, significant poverty still characterises the Gandachal region of Tripura. Located on the border of Bangladesh, the region seems peaceful. Though, it has a history of social protests. The shodhyatris observed the traditional handlooms, crop varieties, musical instruments, and experienced a pervasive culture of sharing values and a warm hospitality. Women here weave colours in their foldable handlooms as also in life while the younger generation has learnt the art of fusing traditional and contemporary designs. Children, as always, amazed us by their unbound imagination to solve problems. Culturally rich, managing local knowledge so well, the Chakma, Tripura, Riang and other communities are asserting their identity. We have to join hands with them to collaboratively discover new paths that don't exacerbate their exploitation and instead enhance their access to modern institutions and technologies.

“Will you tell us what medicine you will use for cancer?” when asked, Anant Kumar Chakma replied, “How can I answer your question? Unless I see the symptoms, I cannot prescribe any medicine. There are different kinds of cancer.” Seldom have we come across traditional healers who are so precise in their pedagogy and have their own standards of the right way to dispense medicines. Anant (85) has a well-

documented register with an index of symptoms and their combinations. Having walked more than 5,000 km, we saw the most thoroughly written documentation is maintained by the Chakma community healers in their own script. Almost every healer we met had a book of their experiences, formulations and feedback from the patients. They do mix extracts of animal parts in a few cases. For instance, the covering

of the liver of poultry, mixed with a particular herb, is applied externally to control certain kinds of tumours. We came across several cases of treating tumours through external applications. This is different from conventional medicine. Perhaps, there is a case for alternate heuristics to be tried and listed through systematic scientific trials. A lively healing tradition, based on local diversity, deserves an urgent attention



Anant Kumar Chakma



Traditional foldable loom

because the younger generation might not be able to sustain it without external incentives and support.

Around 40 *shodhyatris* walked 90 kilometres in Dhalai district in Tripura during the 35th Shodhyatra, organised from May 13-18, 2015. Walking with the Chakma tribe, the participants discovered numerous insights about conservation, creativity and colour. Almost every house there has a vibrant living tradition of weaving on a foldable handloom with striking colours and beautiful patterns. Mostly, the ladies wear what they weave. They use these either for their own use or to gift. The younger ladies have started modifying the designs within the confines of

their traditions. Many could weave a traditional dress of six metres in about 11 days.

There are large number of local varieties of paddy, brinjal, jackfruit and other vegetables, tubers and grain crops. There are paddy varieties which mature in the period ranging from two to six months. Most farmers seem to grow them organically. There is a scarcity of fish and therefore, they catch and dry it and use when needed. There are also a large number of uncultivated vegetables and tubers in the forest.

While most houses have toilets, water is scarce in some of these villages. This is one area where urgent action

is called for. Even schools have lights, functional toilets and water facilities. In general, there is good community sanitation and hygiene in the region.

The hunger for education is intense and we have never come across so many educated grandparents in a tribal region. We did not come across any malnourished child. Healthy people and a healthy environment in an otherwise economically-depressed region points to the interventions required in future. There *is in situ* value addition in local fruits like jackfruits, pineapples, bananas or litchis. This shows great entrepreneurial potential in the youth. An ethical engagement of external entrepreneurs with the local youth can



Woman in traditional attire

trigger knowledge-based enterprises using local resources.

Recently, houses have got tin sheds which is a great relief in the region that receives rains for the larger part of the year. Roads have been well maintained, though there could be a few more culverts wherever bridges have been built. Without letting shallow streams flow, cultivation of paddy in the riverbeds might seem profitable in the short term but in the longer term, the ecosystem might suffer. However, when rains are torrential, earthen bunds don't come in the way of the flow.

While absorbing the generosity of the local culture and institutions, *shodhyatris*



A woman playing a traditional Chakma musical instrument



A community school

from all over the country were drawing inspiration from the outstanding culture of conserving biodiversity, colourful handlooms and clean environment. The presentation of cycle-based ploughs and other water-lifting devices generated a lot of curiosity. There was a small discussion when some of the bamboo workers claimed that they could make more number of incense sticks with their knives than what would be possible by the hand-operated machine by Ralte from Mizoram.

A confluence of local diversity and

creativity with innovators from outside is creating a promising future, full of possibilities. The Honey Bee Network is determined to make a difference by building upon these local initiatives, from a region that has remained otherwise less influenced by exogenous technologies. The exceptions are dish TV, mobile phones and other means of transport. Rising aspirations require a responsive innovation transformation. We look forward to working with local administration, central universities and the state government to explore co-creative development solutions.

For a long stretch, while walking in Gondacherra region, Dholai district of the state, we did not hear the songs of birds nor did we see them flying. Later, we discovered that the people used to make clay balls, dry them and kill birds with a sling, to eat them later. It was difficult to say whether it was low farm productivity and hunger spells or just a cultural habit which led to trapping of jungle fowls and killing of birds. But, lack of any durable asset in their huts did not leave much scope for speculation.

On being asked, one of the Chakmas aimed at a mango on the tree. Without batting an eyelid, he aimed and the mango dropped in a single hit. But, he is an “unskilled” tribal as per NITI Aayog’s definition. Only because leveraging his skills for sports or any other exercise in security agencies is not a part of our inclusive development agenda, he continues being unskilled.

After crossing a cliff, we could see birds. The community seemed to have less stress for survival as there were plain lands, more agricultural yields and income, more cattle and greater diversification in coping strategies. Conservation of birds in tribal regions is vital for ecosystem conservation and management of biodiversity. Ensuring food security for them can be a vital



Chakmas danced and sang traditional songs to honour the Shodhyatris

tool. But, the government must give food subsidy to deserving people (70 per cent of the people could not be deserving the subsidy anyway), so what if birds don't survive, ecosystems deteriorate and poor tribals are forced to migrate?

One of the surprising observations was the use of chemical weedicides in some of the fields, to prepare them for ginger and other crops. The government of Tripura has not taken a view yet to keep such regions chemical-free, unlike Sikkim which has declared itself an organic state. The architectural design innovations were appreciable but there were practically no rooftop water-harvesting structures. With so much problem of water, adding a small bamboo or tin channel below tinsheds and collecting water in tanks (to be distributed later) would be a very affordable and viable water storage structure in this high-rainfall region. The *shodhyatra* also taught us a great deal about the extraordinary tradition of maintaining inter-generational records of herbal-healing knowledge system.

During an idea contest, a little kid Tunnab Joy Tripura, gave an interesting idea of two children holding a long umbrella from two sides under which other kids can walk and thus go to school together. Many communities danced and sang traditional songs to honour the *shodhyatris*. It was observed that in some regions the traditional forms had



Inquisitive, innocent, ingenious children attending the village meeting

given way to modern dance steps, given the numerous dish TVs in the region. Recipe contest brought out diversity of a large number of uncultivated tubers, leafy vegetables and other food items collected from forests for meeting their nutritional needs. Many of these were also functional foods. Handloom designs had a considerable scope for adaptation for contemporary needs.

Chakmas are economically poor but mentally strong. They have a strong spirit and desire to improve community life while living in a stress-prone region. They are proud of their culture. Chakma kids are motivated to learn even during summer vacation.

Chakmas are also a tolerant community.

They have gone through a turbulent past due to socio-political conflicts in the region. Linking a predominantly self-provisioning society with market is of course a daunting task. It may increase their vulnerability but it may also reduce it, depending on the terms at which the exchange takes place between the formal and informal sectors. Honey Bee Network has started the follow-up action. A bamboo-processing machine has been brought from Mizoram and food-processing machine from Haryana. In addition, hand and pedal-driven water pumps have also been brought. Cycle-based devices generated most interest among the community members. The community engagement continues and hopefully, the fuller developmental potential will eventually unfold.

