



Tribal Cultural Heritage in India Foundation

A guided tour

This is the print version of the guided tour found on www.indiantribalheritage.org.

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Offline use and online resources

Start your exploration of India's tribal cultural heritage by taking this guided tour. Once downloaded, it can be followed on any mobile device even without internet connection.

Some of the hyperlinks seen here have capitalized initials (e.g. "History") – they correspond to “category” labels on the website. (Categories help you to research any topic of special interest.)

With a fast internet connection (wifi), clicking on a hyperlink takes you to web page enriched by suitable media content: for instance, a video clip or slideshow showcasing India's tribal heritage.

Tip: if your internet connection is expensive, slow or unreliable, simply ignore the hyperlinks (active in some e-Reader editions, but not all).

Note: For the sake of brevity, only authors' names are given in the following text; in the online version of this tour, quotes are accompanied by full credits.

Stay updated and participate

The indiantribalheritage.org website is being updated continually, so whenever you are online, check out what's [new and interesting](#).

You are most welcome to also [suggest a resource](#)!

1. Introduction

The [term Adivasi](#) refers to the various “indigenous peoples of India” (*ādi* ”original”, “earliest” - *vāsi* ”inhabitant”, “settler”):

Indigenous communities of India are commonly referred to as tribal or adivasi communities and are recognised as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India. – Archana Mehendale



Adivasi children during a workshop: Honey Festival in Gudalur (Tamil Nadu)

© Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust

India has the most diversified population of native peoples worldwide:

According to the official Census held in 2001, Adivasis constitute 8 per cent of the nation’s total population, over 84 million people. Unofficial figures vary significantly but represent a much higher proportion of India’s population. (unhcr.org)

For J.J. Burman, “the term ‘indigenous peoples’ itself appears to be [contentious](#) in the Indian context as there are many claimants to it”. Yet in 2011, a [Supreme Court of India Bench](#) cited historical and anthropological evidence that “ancestors of the present Adivasis were the original inhabitants of India” and asserted that “despite horrible oppression on them, the tribals of India have generally (though not invariably) retained a higher level of ethics than the non-tribals.”

Historian Romila Thapar (in an interview published March 2, 2016) asserts that in India, "**Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Dalits and Adivasis are all equal citizens**. All citizens have the right to debate and discuss their duties towards the state and also the obligations of the state to ensure that the claims to human rights of all citizens are met by the state to an equal degree."

2. Rights

Tribal communities are entitled to being involved in a dialogue on eye-level rather than being told how to manage their affairs: Adivasis have a proud [History](#) of their own. Wherever their traditional way of life remains feasible, they avoid dependance on charity.

India's representative at the [2007 United Nations General Assembly](#) affirmed his government's commitment promotion and protection of [indigenous peoples' rights](#):

Ajai Malhotra (India) said his country had consistently favoured the promotion and protection of indigenous peoples' rights" and affirmed "their right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as means and ways for financing their autonomous functions.

Photo: United Nations General Assembly © [wikipedia.org](#)



Addressing [Misconceptions](#) is bound to accelerate the implementation of policies designed to alleviate [Rural poverty](#). For this to happen, the aspirations of tribal youths must be taken into account in all domains of public life.

[Accountability](#) is a key issue for any organization fostering India's tribal [Cultural heritage](#): ensuring that it will flourish in the world's largest [Democracy](#). As a case in point, Union Minister of State for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh called for a [change in the mental attitude](#) towards adivasis and forest-dwellers at a function in Gadchiroli district (Maharashtra) in 2011:

About 25 crore [250 million] people live off the forests, we cannot keep them out. [...] The adivasi is not the enemy of the forests.



Honey festival © Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust
(Category: [Bees and honey](#))

3. Youth

In its pursuit of viable solutions to the many challenges posed by [Modernity](#), India's urban youth has begun to take pride in indigenous culture: "tribal" [Fashion](#), [Health and nutrition](#), [Nature and wildlife](#), [Eco tourism](#) and the [Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) are regularly featured in the [Media](#).

[Santal dance](#) on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the RSV School ([West Bengal](#))



It is up to young members of tribal communities themselves to overcome those [Misconceptions](#) or stereotypes that stand in the way of their self-development. Many among them have realized that progress and emancipation in a democratic society would elude their communities unless they make their voice heard in higher education. For this they need to overcome the alienation from their cultural roots often blamed on [Colonial policies](#) and their impact on the country's educational system.

As a case in point, a literary meet in Jharkhand 23-24 January 2013 was titled "JAGWAR: Santal Onolia Helmel". The Santali term Jagwar means being "vigilant, watchful". Public readings gave senior Santali authors and scholars an opportunity to interact with budding poets, prose writers and the audience.

The Keynote speaker, Prof. Promodini Hansdak spoke eloquently on the problems facing Santali language and literature within the Indian academia and outside it:

She pointed out how the identity of a group is closely linked to the protection of its language.

Prof. Nikudimus Tudu underlined the need to rejuvenate Santali literature and language through the use of effective pedagogical practices in schools and universities. The challenges posed by social change came into focus:

One specific trend that was discussed at length in the Akhara was the use of 'crude language' by new writers, similar to the trend found in the Dalit autobiographies of so-called 'lower-caste' groups in India. This controversial debate centred on the emergence of a new idiom of expression in a world poised between tradition and change. The question in everyone's mind was: Should this new trend be viewed negatively or should the traditional literary norms be redefined?

Lokhon Chand Hansdak and Mr. Shibu Soren, two poets from Birbhum, West Bengal introduced the incantatory style in poetry reading:

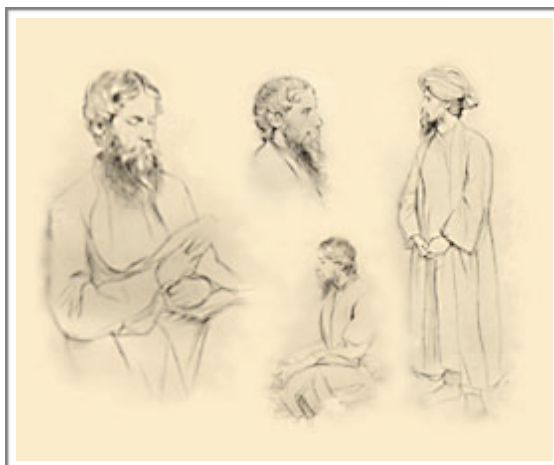
Their poems may be described as ballads that began with Santal relationship to Nature, and then moved back to the Santal Hul or Rebellion of 1855-56. No tribal poetry is complete without going back to the ancestral and primeval world of past history, folklore and mythology.

Participants examined the impact of this event on Santal society in a critical manner, hoping that such events would become a regular feature:

We felt as if we had entered a new world through our rich and vibrant literary heritage. We felt glad, confident and watchful... in other words, we felt Jagwar! – From convener Ivy Imogene Hansdak's report on the Santali Literary Meet 2013 held in Jharkhand

4. Modernity

[Rabindranath Tagore](#) (1861-1941) was the first public figure to highlight the value of his country's tribal cultural heritage. He created an environment that accounts for the fact that Adivasi culture has long exerted a “[profound influence on modern Indian art](#)”. The same can be said about the inspiration derived by flute player [Pannalal Ghosh](#), a pioneer in the field of Indian classical music as we know it today.



Rabindranath Tagore: A collage of portraits
done by W. Rothenstein © nobelprize.org
(Category: [Tagore and rural culture](#))

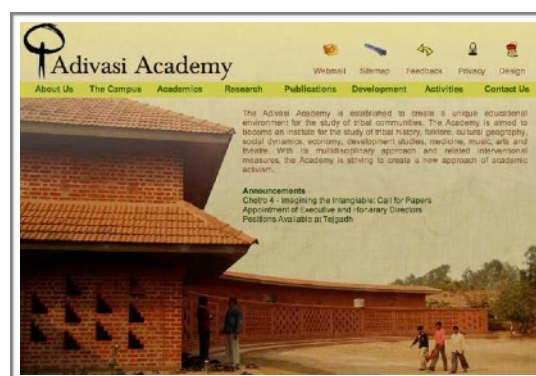
[Jawaharlal Nehru](#) (India's first Prime Minister, 1889-1964) discouraged the imposition of interventionist policies on tribal communities: he would not agree to creating a mere “second-rate copy of ourselves”.

While the development of modern [Community facilities](#) and educational institutions gathers momentum, [Tribal elders](#) continue to be revered in several parts of the country. The same can be said of the elevated status assigned to [Women](#) in many tribal communities.

5. Institutions

Indian and foreign [museum collections](#), just as their educational departments, provide indigenous communities with new opportunities to be seen, heard and – most importantly – to be respected by the outside world:

The [Adivasi Academy](#) has established a museum of indigenous communities at Tejgadh in Gujarat. It is called ‘vachaa’, meaning voice or expression. Vachaa functions as a forum for expression of creativity and offers intellectual space to indigenous communities documenting and creating dynamical displays of their expressions, both artistic and cultural, in the form of objects, artefacts, performances and digitized multimedia images.



6. Environment

Some of India's leading natural scientists, historians and concerned citizens are acutely aware of the imminent threat posed to their country's [Ecology and environment](#).

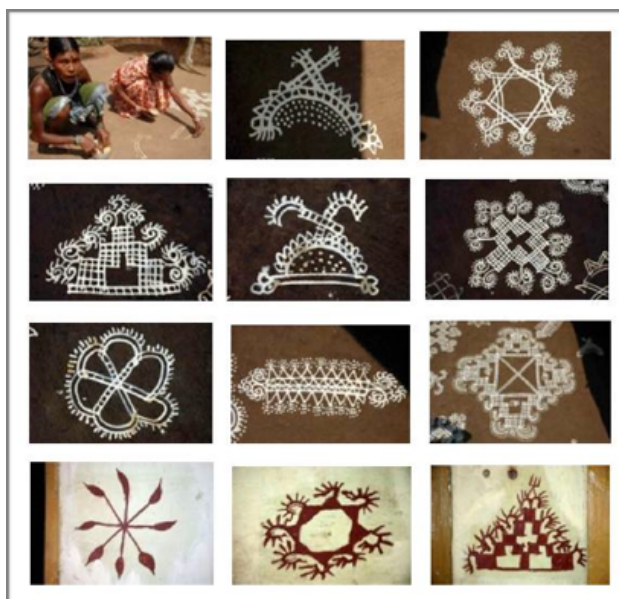


[Halakki](#) woman ([Karnataka](#)) © Venkatesh Lakshmanan

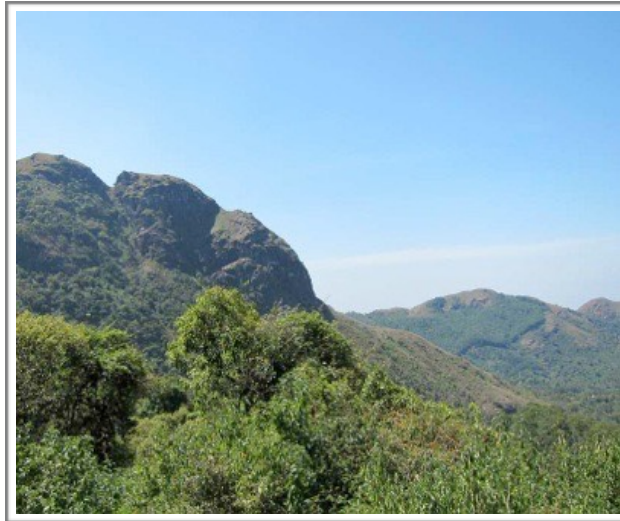
In a paper called “[Perceiving the Forest](#)“, historian Romila Thapar looks at the way people observed and wrote about the forest at different times, and to see how over time it changes:

Environmental history is being researched in a much bigger way than before. This is apparent in discussions on the decline of Harappan cities. What caused the decline? Today we know that invasions and conquest are very often really quite marginal. More likely factors could be deforestation, possible changes in climate at that time, changes in sea level and the silting up of settlements, flooding, changing river courses like that of the Satlej or the disappearance of the Hakra, and the proximity of settlements to particular ecologies.

Writer [Mahasweta Devi](#) maintains that “Indian forests, rivers and mountains owe their survival to Adivasis ... the most civilised people”.



Floor decorations made by [Halakki](#) women ([Karnataka](#))
© Venkatesh Lakshmanan



Nilgiri mountains above Gudalur valley ([Tamil Nadu](#))
(Category: [Western Ghats – tribal heritage & ecology](#))

[Kamaljit S. Bawa](#) is convinced that the country needs Partnerships for sustaining life:

India is blessed with unique and an enormous amount of biodiversity that sustains many of our economic endeavours, and provides aesthetic, cultural and spiritual values. This biodiversity is declining, and this decline is threatening our survival.

In her award winning documentary "[Have you seen the arana?](#)", filmmaker Sunanda Bhat follows a group of tribal women concerned over the disappearance of medicinal plants from the forest. A farmer tells about his commitment to growing traditional varieties of rice organically. We gain fresh insights into shifting relations between people, knowledge systems and environment. Interwoven into contemporary narratives is an ancient tribal creation myth that traces the passage of their ancestors across this land, recalling past ways of reading and mapping the terrain.



Since the [Hyderabad biodiversity pledge](#) was adopted in 2012, concerned citizens want their elected officials to act more responsibly as far as India's natural resources are concerned.

Biodiversity is under threat from a range of sources ... The question now is whether India is going to honestly identify what this underlying driver is and make a serious effort to balance the development versus nature battle. – Tarsh Thekaekara (www.thesholatrust.org) in The Hindu, October 17, 2012

Most importantly, laws such as the much-discussed [Forest Rights Act \(FRA\)](#) must be fully understood by the communities concerned.

7. Learning about – and from – India's tribal communities

[Lachman Khubchandani](#) believes that tribal culture provides “a living example of the [Gandhian](#) concept of trusteeship”.

[Tarsh Thekaekara](#) asserts that tribal communities “have been living in harmony with nature for centuries and have not caused any destruction at all.”



Kunda Kotagiri, a [Kota](#) village in the [Nilgiri](#) mountains ([Tamil Nadu](#))

[Arup Maharatna](#) quotes C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, “a celebrated authority on Indian tribes”:

[O]nly one or two generations ago many tribal communities enjoyed the advantages of a well-balanced ecology fully in tune with the natural resources of their environment and boast an overall quality of life superior in many ways to that of large sections of the Indian rural population. Adequate food-supplies, non-exploitative social structure, freedom from indebtedness and other forms of dependence on non-tribal outsiders, equality of the sexes and a remarkable tolerance in all interpersonal relations were outstanding characteristics of such tribal societies.



Members of the [Kani](#) (Kaani) community with saplings donated by the Tribal Foundation (Nagercoil, [Tamil Nadu](#)); the production of organic fruit is meant for local use and will also generate some income

[Environmental educationist S. Davidson](#) attributes the remarkable health among elders of the Kaani community to these very factors: even during celebrations, they eat with moderation and avoid preserved food just as cooking with oil. During a recent medical survey among 350 members living in the Kanyakumari mountain forests, a Kaani woman aged 95 was found to be enjoying perfect health. Conversely, an increase of diabetes-induced eye problems and hypertension was observed among those who had adopted the less active, more stressful lifestyle characteristic of urban Indian society.



Village craftsman Devarajan is proud of his heritage and determined to keep it alive. The same can be said of his son Lokarajan and other [Kota](#) youths, both boys and girls. He aspires to become an engineer.

(Categories: [Crafts and visual arts](#), [Music and dance](#), [Tribal elders](#))

8. Education, tribal languages and self-development

[Mari Marcel Thekaekara](#), a columnist who has lived amidst the Paniya, Bettakurumba and Kattunaicken communities of South India's Nilgiri mountains for over 25 years observes:

We non-adivasis were constantly stunned by the fact that Adivasi kids never fought for a sweet, however tiny. They always shared it solemnly and equally, a truly amazing sight to see.

The school they attend encourages these youngsters to “teach all the kids what Adivasi means and that our people are spread out all over India and all over the world.”



Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya – school for Adivasi children of the Gudalur valley (Tamil Nadu)
(Categories: [Childhood and children](#), [Community facilities](#), [Education and literacy](#), [Health and nutrition](#))

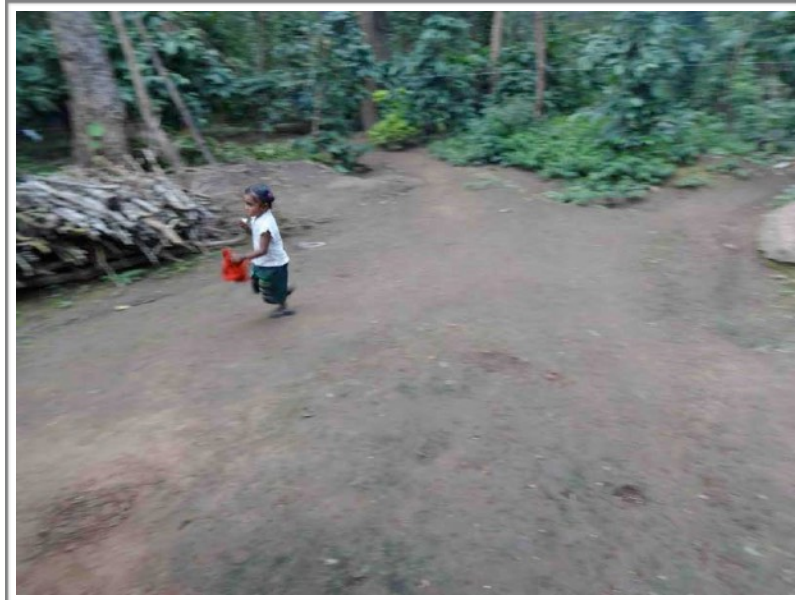
The stupendous task of resolving long-standing imbalances requires committed educators, politicians, academics, social and medical workers. They can only succeed if more tribal youths gain access to quality [Education](#) and actively contribute a more balanced [Media portrayal](#).





At the same time, all tribal children are entitled to retaining their cultural and [linguistic identity](#):

A sensitive cadre of teachers and bureaucracy is definitely required to make the difference. At another level, educational deprivation must be seen in the context of overall deprivation of the community and hence emphasis must be placed on improving the situation of tribal communities in general. Restoring land and livelihoods, empowering women, providing basic civic amenities such as fuel, water and sanitation are preconditions to advancements of rights of tribal children. – Archana Mehendale



Through Children's Eyes – from a series of photos taken by Adivasi children during a photo and video workshop © [Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust](#)
(Category: [Photos and slideshows](#))

This agrees with the experiences gathered at the Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust in Gudalur (Tamil Nadu). Here members of several tribal communities belonging to different linguistic groups and surrounded by three official languages – Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada – manage their own educational and health institutions.



Wish tree mural by pupils at the school run by the Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust
(Categories: [Education and literacy](#), [Success story](#))

Based on personal [teaching experiences with English medium in Adivasi education](#), the trust's co-founder Stan Thekaekara observes:

Our challenge therefore is not ensuring that they do not learn other languages but ensuring that this is not at the cost of their own language. | More about [Multi-lingual education](#) >>

According to the Unesco Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger 2009, India has around 196 endangered languages. Prof. Omkar Koul, former director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, observes:

No one knew how many minor and tribal languages existed in India at present. The Indian Constitution protects the right of children to learn through their mother tongue. – The Telegraph, March 3 , 2011



School for Toda and Kota children in the Nilgiri mountains (Tamil Nadu)
(Categories: [Education and literacy](#), [Government of India](#))

Prof. Ganesh Devy (Chair, People's Linguistic Survey of India) believes that the problems faced by speakers of indigenous languages should be solved by other means than legislation:

Adivasi languages in a state have always strayed into the larger language of that state. The contact with Persian, Arabic, which was active at one time too has weakened now. The market needs have brought the bhashas closer to English, and there's too much of intimacy with English. So languages keep changing all the time. And so long as human beings are there, interacting with the phenomenal world, languages will be there. They need greater attention, but it cannot happen through legislation. Languages should not be legislated. When there was no legislation, languages were safer. With legislation, they start going down. That is the experience all over the world. In Russia, Spain and China it has been so, in India it has been so. – A View of Higher Education in India | [More about Endangered languages](#) >>

Award-winning publisher [Ruby Hembrom](#), in her column for the New Indian Express, seeks to strike a balance between the needs of the modern world – like education and a fair command of English – and Adivasis' affirmation of their cultural roots:

Being Adivasi doesn't automatically qualify one to avail the quota. [...] The disparity in standards of education in rural or urban areas is so large that we cannot make the cut, cannot crack entrance exams or interviews despite the reservation provisions. These gaps translate to opportunity gaps. How can someone qualify from vacuum?

Source: "Penalised for the State's mistakes" in The New Indian Express, 11th August 2016
Ruby Hembrom is the founder and director of [adivaani](#), an archiving and publishing outfit of and by Adivasis

9. Organizations

Several [Organizations](#) promoting the welfare of India's tribal communities have enlisted the services of professionals. To name but a few, there are [Accord](#), the [Video Volunteers](#) and the concerned journalists working for [India's periodicals](#); information specialists starting a [literacy project](#); the [Association for India's Development](#) just as the volunteers who dedicate themselves to [health and environmental education](#).



Santal children taking photos of their peers during a workshop at the [Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram](#) school in Ghosaldanga (West Bengal)
(Categories: [Childhood and children](#), [Success story](#), [Tagore and rural culture](#))

They all share their knowledge and skills for a common cause: seeing to it that the nation lives up to the promises embedded in its [constitution](#). It goes without saying that there cannot be any lasting results without the active involvement of members of [tribal communities](#) themselves:

Our fate in our hands: Addressing any single aspect of peoples' lives is unlikely to improve their living standard as a whole. We therefore have taken a holistic approach, trying to address all relevant aspects of village life [...] All our initiatives reflect the rhythm and the abilities of the villagers. – Boro Baski (Santal teacher at Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram school at Ghosaldanga, West Bengal) on the concept of self-determined village development.



Through Children's Eyes – photo and video workshop © Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust
(Categories: [Video contents](#), [Video resources – external](#))

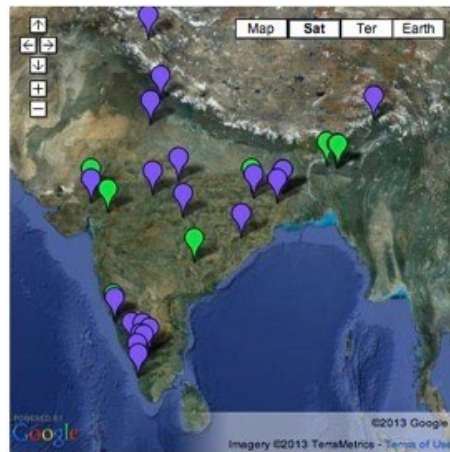
The “media age” offers infinite opportunities to educators and Adivasi youths alike. A selection of existing documentaries and educational projects is showcased on the present website:

- [Video contents](#)
- [Video resources – external](#)
- [Slideshows](#)
- [Success stories](#)
- [Websites by tribal communities](#)

10. Maps

On the *Tribal Cultural Heritage in India Foundation* website, you find many interactive Google maps:

- [An alphabetical journey across India](#)
- [A virtual journey across time and space](#)
- [Visit a museum collection in India](#)
- [Locations for video documentaries and references to external media contents](#)
- [Places associated with press reports on India's tribal cultural heritage, educational projects and initiatives to address misconceptions](#)
- [Take a virtual journey across India](#)



Impressions of maps (screenshots).

For online access to all the maps available, click [here](#) >>

11. Online resources – indiantribalheritage.org

Learn more about India's tribal heritage by using “[Categories](#)”, for instance one of the following:

- [Childhood and children](#)
- [Community facilities](#)
- [Crafts and visual arts](#)
- [Customs](#)
- [Dress and ornaments](#)
- [Endangered language](#)
- [Fashion](#)
- [Games and leisure time](#)
- [Health and nutrition](#)
- [History](#)
- [Homes and utensils](#)
- [Languages and linguistic heritage](#)
- [Literature - fiction](#)
- [Multi-lingual education](#)
- [Music and dance](#)
- [Performing arts](#)
- [Puppetry](#)
- [Revival of traditions](#)
- [Seasons and festivals](#)
- [Social conventions](#)
- [Storytelling](#)
- [Success stories](#)
- [Tribal elders](#)
- [Video contents](#)
- [Video resources – external](#)
- [Worship and rituals](#)

Related tips and posts

- [Books on tribal culture and related resources](#)
- [International Days celebrated by UNESCO – United Nations](#)
- [Learning from each other and telling stories](#)
- [Learn more](#)
- [Learn more about India's 29 States and 7 Union Territories: Information provided by the Government of India – From Andhra Pradesh to West Bengal](#)
- [Search useful information before visiting India: Responsible tourism, eco tourism and volunteer work](#)
- [Tips for teachers and students](#)

12. About the foundation

The *Tribal Cultural Heritage in India Foundation* supports projects by and for tribal communities seeking to showcase their own cultural heritage; and this as citizens of a democratic and secular country. It promotes cultural awareness in conjunction with literacy programmes and health care. – From the *Mission statement*

More information on the foundation and its objectives is provided online on www.indiantribalheritage.org.

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This guided tour is meant to give lay readers a balanced overview of a vast field to which many have contributed: members of India's indigenous communities, teachers, students, researchers and volunteers from all over the country and abroad.

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Title photograph of Adivasi children in Wayanad (Kerala) © [Arun VC](#)

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Photo: Adivasi musicians during a celebration at Kanavu in [Wayanad](#) (Kerala)