



TIGERS & TRIBES

A SILENT CONVERSATION



TIGERS AND TRIBES - A Silent Conversation
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ISBN - 978-81-974002-3-0

First edition printed by VK Digi Prints, New Delhi.
© Sankala Foundation July 2014



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TIGERS AND TRIBES



Honble President of India interacts with the tribal artists at the art exhibition, 'Silent Conversation: From Margins to the Centre', in New Delhi

FOREST AND TIGERS

THROUGH THE EYES OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES



In Indian religious and cultural heritage, the tiger blends images of power, magnificence, and nobility. This majestic creature is sometimes a protective deity, often a fellow traveller in the spiritual journey, and even a sorcerer of great influence. No other creature appears to have influenced art, literature, myths and legends more than the tiger.

Several ancient texts – scriptures, epics and treatises – mention the tiger with reverence and awe. The earliest representations of the tiger appear on rock art, especially in hilly areas. Clear images of the tiger emerged during the Indus Valley Civilisation (circa 3000 to 1700 BCE) mostly on seals and tablets. A clay tablet from Harappa depicted a female figure with two tigers – an image that portrays ideas of divinity and fertility, but also appears to represent the unity of humans and animals.

The Sanskrit word for tiger *vyagra* appeared for the first time in the later Vedas, the religious texts composed during the 2nd millennium BCE. Historians and linguists suggest that as the Sanskrit word *vyagra* derives from the root 'scent out', it implies that the communities in this era studied tiger behaviour closely. Several hymns mention the tiger; and in the Atharvaveda both the ferocity of the tiger and its protective powers are detailed.

The two great Indian epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata – include descriptions about the tiger. The Ramayana is rich in narrating the peace and tranquility of the forest where *ridhis* (hermits) harmoniously dwell with wild beasts like the tiger. Such references establish the early appreciation of the positive relationship between wildlife and humans.

In the Mahabharata, the destruction of forest (like the burning of Khandava forest to build the capital for Pandavas in Indraprastha) is referred to as 'war' against Nature. Again, the Mahabharata emphasises the deep connection between the forest and tiger, how the tiger protects the forest, and the forest nurtures the tiger. In Valmiki Thapar's *Tiger: The Ultimate Guide*, a text is quoted from the Udyogaparvan (the fifth of the 18 books of Mahabharata) to exemplify this relationship: "Do not cut down the forest with its tigers and do not banish the tigers from the forest. The tiger perishes without the forest, and the forest perishes without its tigers. Therefore, the tiger should stand guard over the forest and the forest should protect all its tigers."

Such an assertion, supported by a treasure of myths, rituals and legends, motivated forest dwellers towards conservation of the forest and the tiger. With time such beliefs inspired various tribal communities living in and around forests to adapt a lifestyle that does not harm or exploit the forest.

One of the most dominant cultural ideas to take birth was the worship of the tiger as a force of nature and as a figure associated with deities like Goddess Durga. Goddess Durga is often shown to be riding a tiger or lion, symbolising unlimited power that is both destructive and constructive. Thus, the tiger became an accomplice in the fight against evil, and a guide towards divinity.

However, with the establishment of regular human settlements and the rapid pace of deforestation, the tiger's survival became uncertain. The sensitivity with which ancient cultures approached the forest and tiger appeared to fade. By late 15th century, substantial evidence of the tiger being hunted emerged. Several royal paintings portrayed hunting scenes, implying the human instinct to dominate and control the tiger. By the late 19th century, the tiger was considered more a predator, a big hunting game trophy.

After India's independence from colonial rule in 1947, the hunting of big cats did not immediately end. While early records indicate that tiger population was in the tens of thousands, it shrank rapidly in the subsequent decades, largely due to sports and trophy hunting. By the early 1970s, the Bengal tiger was almost on the verge of extinction. Besides incessant hunting, the rising demand for skin, other body parts and bones resulted in an incredible number of tigers being wiped out of India.

IDEAS AROUND THE EXHIBITION

NATURE, HERITAGE AND HUMANITY



The Tiger Census 2022 revealed that India is now home to 3,167 tigers. Its 55 tiger reserves, spread across 18 states, offer refuge to the big cat. Against the backdrop of the 55 tiger reserves, the rich culture and heritage of India comes to the forefront. At the November 2023 exhibition 'Silent Conversation: From Margins to the Centre', artists from close to 110 tribal communities in and around the reserves shared their knowledge of the science of colours, motifs, designs, materials, form, and space. An exceptional understanding of their material and culture helps them to create products of true value and significance. Their craft practices are age-old and have an unbroken tradition which dates back 5,000 years, adding to the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the country.

The tribal communities have a lot to offer and teach to the urban population of India. Their creative expression by way of visual art and crafts represents their core philosophies and beliefs. Their life is entrenched in Nature, where the forest is their home, and their gods and mythologies are all linked to their cosmology.

The north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand host reserves including Corbett, Rajaji, Dudhwa, Pilibhit, and Ranipur. These reserves are home to tribal communities of Van Gujjars, Bhotia, Tharu, and Raji. Whereas tribal communities of Tharu, Uraon, Gonds, Halba, Bhutta, Maria, Oraon, Chero, Birjia, Korwa, and Kherwar inhabit tiger reserves in Central India, states like Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh host reserves such as Valmiki, Achanakmar, Indravati, Udanti-Sitanadi, Palamu, Bandhavgarh, Kanha, Panna, Pench, Sanjay-Dubri, and Satpura.

Journeying into the northeast, states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Mizoram possess an array of tiger reserves, including Dampa, Manas, Nameri, Orang, Kaziranga, Pakke, Namdapha, and Kamlang. Diverse tribal communities such as the Lisu, Chakmas, Mishmis, Singphos, Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, Kacharis, and the Garos live in the surrounding natural landscapes.

Towards the west, Rajasthan and Maharashtra are home to tiger sanctuaries like Mukundra, Ramgarh Vishdhari, Ranthambore, Sariska, Bor, Melghat, Nawegaon-Nagzira, Pench, Sahyadri, and Tadoba-Andhari. These areas are also inhabited by tribal communities such as the Meenas, Kallhels, Gurjars, Raibaris, Mogiyas, Korkus, Dhanwars, Gonds, Parlihs, and Nihals.

The rich biodiversity of southern India (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana and Tamil Nadu), can be witnessed within tiger reserves such as Nagarjunasagar-Srisailem, Bandipur, Bhadra, Biligiri Ranganathaswamy, Dandeli-Anshi (Kali), Nagarhole, Parambikulam, Periyar, Amrabad, Kawal, Anamalai, Kalakad-Mundanthurai, and Mudumalai. Tribal communities like the Kurumbars, Paniyas, Malasar, Malai Malasars, Kadars, Eravallars, Pulayars, Maduvars, Kasavas, Palliyars, Urali Kattu Naickers, Irulas, and Chettis have deep-rooted connections to their natural surroundings and play a critical role in its preservation.

Lastly, in the eastern states of Odisha and West Bengal, in and around the tiger reserves of Satkosia, Simlipal, Buxa, and Sundarbans, tribals like the Oraons, Nagals, Rabhas, Dukpas, Garos, Santhals, and Meehs protect their remarkable natural habitats.

The tiger stands as a symbol of power, protection and spirituality. It serves as a symbol of strength and holds great cultural significance. The tiger is the keystone of ecology and is known as *Bagheshwar* among many tribal communities. The word *Bagheshwar* literally translates to 'Tiger God'. The folklore and mythologies of tribal communities view tigers as protectors who safeguard their crops from plant-eating animals like deer, wild boars, and bears. The reverence is also reflected in the tribal rituals, during the season of crop harvesting, where the farmers offer a portion of their first harvest to the statue of a tiger. Such rituals and beliefs have reinforced the faith in the preservation of Nature.

The tribal communities have their own singular relationship with the land they live in. Most of the naturalists, tour guides and jeep drivers and forest guards in national parks and the reserves are tribals who have been living in harmony with predators like tigers and leopards. Nature in all its glory from flora to fauna is deeply integrated into the life of the tribal communities.

The exhibition 'Silent Conversation: From Margins to the Centre' offered an opportunity to work with the people living in deep, remote forests and to learn about the contribution they make in conserving the forest and the wildlife. It provided a glimpse of the harmonious coexistence of humanity and Nature, and highlighted the urgency to conserve and protect our forests and forest dwellers.



Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, interacts with the tribal leaders, members of Self-Help Groups and communities belonging to areas under the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, at Pakaria village in Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh, on 1 July, 2023.

A POWERFUL BOND OF COEXISTENCE



Since time immemorial, in the heart of India's tiger reserves, a silent but powerful alliance has thrived – a bond of coexistence between the tribal communities and tigers of India. This bond is not merely a matter of proximity between the two, but a harmonious relationship woven through the fabric of time, culture, and tradition.

The conservation of wildlife, specially of species like the Bengal tiger*, is intricately intertwined with the customs, rituals, and way of life of tribal communities. For generations, these communities have served as guardians of the forest, their livelihoods intricately connected to the well-being of the natural world around them. The protection of tigers is not just a responsibility imposed upon them; it is a deeply ingrained value passed down through the ages and is instilled in their daily life.

In India, there are over 730 communities referred to as Scheduled Tribes (STs). Among these communities, 75 are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) and live in more than 22,000 villages across the country. As per the 2011 Census, the total population of tribal communities in India is 30.45 crores (304.5 million). The framers of the Indian Constitution granted special provisions for safeguarding tribal culture and the advancement of STs. These measures encompass the preservation of their language, script, and other cultural facets, ensuring their educational welfare, implementing economic protections, and facilitating political empowerment.

* The Bengal tiger (subspecies Panthera tigris) is found in India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, western China, western Myanmar, and Nepal.

In addition to these constitutional safeguards, a dedicated ministry, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, was established in 1999. In the last 10 years, the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has tirelessly worked to enhance the quality of life of all citizens, with a special emphasis on marginalised sections of society like the tribal communities. This commitment has translated into a series of initiatives aimed at conservation of forests, wildlife, water bodies, and the environment. Further, on several occasions the prime minister has expressed his affinity with tribal communities and resolved that their art will be recognised in the mainstream.

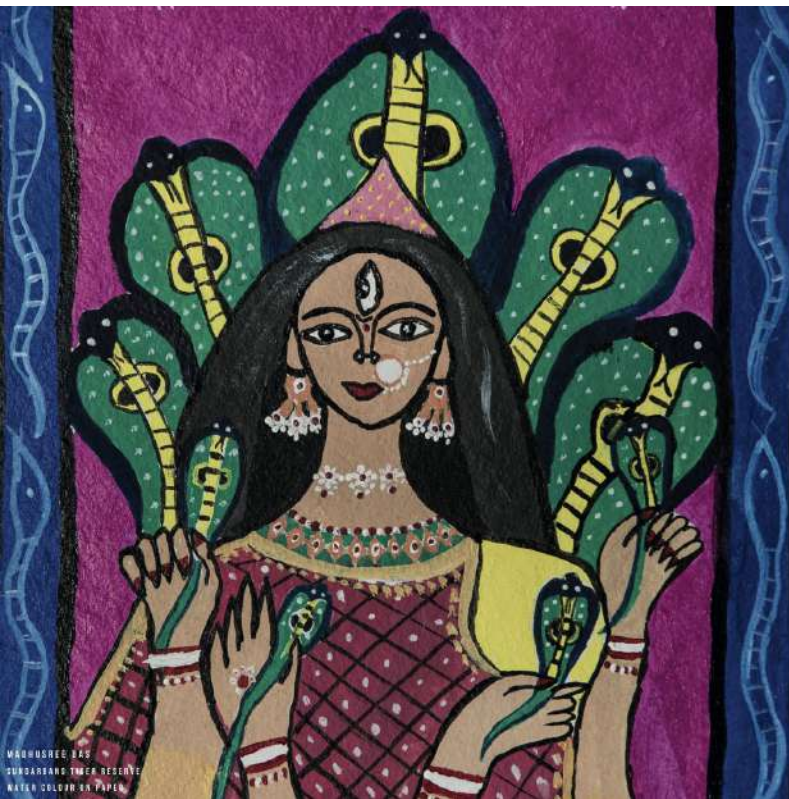
The 2023 art exhibition (1-5 November) 'Silent Conversation: From Margins to the Centre' promoted three areas of interest: wildlife conservation, preservation of culture, and community empowerment. The paintings and some artefacts on display beautifully expressed the majestic tiger and its relationship with the forest and forest dwellers. All proceeds from the sale of the artworks went to the artists, thereby creating avenues for alternate livelihoods for them.

This visual art book is a complementary compilation to the exhibition. Each chapter is a window into the diverse cultural mosaic of 18 states of India that are home to unique tiger habitats and vibrant tribal communities. From the misty forests of Uttarakhand to the sun-drenched plains of Maharashtra, the rolling landscapes of Jharkhand to the haunting hills of Kerala, this book offers a glimpse into the traditions, customs, and artistic expressions of these communities. These art forms offer a metaphor for life of harmony and preservation of Nature.

The striking imagery of the book captures the essence of tribal life — the close kinship with Nature, time-honoured customs, and creative expressions passed down through generations. Each piece is distinct in its style, symbols, and colours, supported by an equally imaginative set of stories. Tribal art — poetry, songs, and paintings — intuitively speaks about their active role in protecting the forests. Their reverence for Nature is informed by their everyday and lived experiences around the tiger reserves.

The book also bears witness to the resilience and ingenuity of India's tribal communities, whose existence is intricately intertwined with the preservation of India's biodiversity. It stands as a testament to their invaluable contributions, inspiring others to actively contribute to their betterment.

This book is an effort on behalf of Sankala Foundation to emphasise the immense contribution of tribal communities and to promote their values of conservation and harmony to a wider audience. Equally worthy is the vision of the National Tiger Conservation Authority in introducing such a concept that urges for a more humanistic approach towards conservation. Tiger also advocate for better recognition of tribal art, exploring possibilities of alternate livelihoods. Hopefully, this visual art book will inspire young and old within India and abroad to make conservation their mission and appreciate the efforts and art of tribal communities.



MAHUSHEE DAS
SUNDARBANS TIGER RESERVE
WATER COLOUR ON PAPER

WEST BENGAL



WHERE GODDESS RIDES THE TIGER

West Bengal is embellished with hills, wetlands, and the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans. West Bengal is also the region where the sacred Ganges finds its final repose in the warm waters of the Bay of Bengal at Ganga Sagar.

The state has a rich fauna that includes 10,013 species out of the 89,451 animal species that are found in India. West Bengal has two tiger reserves: the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve and the Buxa Tiger Reserve.

Sundarbans is a maze of estuaries and islands. It is the only mangrove in the world inhabited by tigers. The big cats here swim long distance and feed on crab, fish and even water monitor lizards. The Sundarbans have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Buxa Reserve is an essential corridor connecting Buxa with forests in Bhutan, Kochugaoan, and Jaldapara, contributing to the Northeast and Brahmaputra Valley tiger landscape.

The state is home to several tribes like the Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Hos, and Bedias. Tribals communities living around the reserves mostly work on farms, they also fish and collect honey. The forest is both a place of reverence and an area of threat. The local spiritual and religious leaders are consulted before entering the forest, and offerings are extended to forest deities including Bon Bibi and Dakshin Rai. Bon Bibi protects both humans and animals in the forest. Dakshin Rai too is a protective force, symbolising the tiger. The local shaman, 'Gurin' and other spiritual authorities proside blessed red cloth and other charms to keep locals safe when they travel to the forest. Honey collectors are also accompanied by Gurins on the entire journey.

Bengal's folk and tribal art evolved as a cultural protest to the temple art conventions and royal court influences. The Santhals express their feelings of joy, devotion and celebration through dance, music and a very enchanting minimalist form of painting, also called Santhali. The now familiar Pattachitra scroll painting is a cherished form of the region.



DEEPA NEGI
CORBETT TIGER RESERVE
COLOUR ON CLOTH

Both the tiger reserves, Rajaji Tiger Reserve and Jim Corbett Tiger Reserve, host lush forests, alpine meadows, and riverine habitats. The Rajaji reserve is named after C. Rajgopalachari, the last Governor General of India. The reserve includes deciduous forests, riverine vegetation, scrublands, grasslands, and pine forests.

Corbett Tiger Reserve is considered a jewel among tiger reserves. Established in 1936 as Hailey National Park, the Corbett reserve was renamed multiple times. It finally took on the name Corbett National Park in 1957, honouring the legacy of Jim Corbett, a renowned British hunter and conservationist instrumental in the park's creation. This reserve, the first national park on the Asian mainland and third globally, has evolved into a haven for biodiversity and a sanctuary for the majestic Bengal tiger.

Uttarakhand's rich cultural texture is woven by communities like the Garhwals, Kumaonis, Jaunsaris, Bhotis or Bhotias, and Gujjars. A very popular ritual folk art is Aipan, executed by skilled women artists from Kumaon. The canvas, whether it is floors, walls, thresholds, or pots, is first prepared with a mixture of clay, cow dung, and straw. This surface is then coated with red clay, which when dry serves as the base. Using rice paste, the artist draws freehand. The art brings unity of aesthetics and Nature.

The Van Gujjars, semi-nomadic pastoralists, and the Bhotis with their Tibetan Buddhist influence, are integral to the cultural fabric of Corbett reserve. The Van Gujjars, living in the upper Himalayan regions during summers and lower Gangetic plains during winters, communicate their cultural practices through traditional songs, stories, and customs. Another tribal community, the Raubhils, relies on agriculture and forest resources for sustenance. The forest department is active in engaging local communities and providing them with alternative livelihoods. Many men and women work as tour guides, drivers, and forest guards.

Deepa Negi (from the Pahadi community), who lives close to Corbett Tiger Reserve, created an Aipan on cloth. She shared that women from tribal communities are often part of self-help groups. These groups enable them to draw loans to use during an emergency. Despite the challenges, they play an active role in preserving the ecology of the area.



DEEPA NEGI
CORBETT TIGER RESERVE
COLOUR ON CLOTH



ROHIT SHUKLA
PENCH TIGER RESERVE
ACRYLIC ON PAPER



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