



CHURCH INDIA INDIGENOUS PEOPLE CHRISTIANS

Last, but not least: Advancing the lives of India's neglected Indigenous peoples

India's Adivasi communities enjoy a deep connection to the forest and their homeland, and the Catholic Church works to support them through education, medical assistance, and community development.

By Anubha George, CNEWA

Mongala walks out of his hut of mud and bamboo and greets his visitors with folded hands. "Namaste," he says.

He smiles and invites them into his home. It's minimalistic, with just enough room for the bare necessities.

"Please have lunch with us. I'll cook," he says.

He leads his guests to a tamarind tree and hands them a leaf with salt and cayenne pepper to eat with the sour but delicious tamarind fruit, picked fresh from the tree.

It's a beautiful winter day in Koleng, a village in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, known as the rice bowl of the country. The sunshine is neither too harsh nor too dull. The sky is blue.

Meanwhile, Mongala starts preparing the meal. He kills one of the chickens he keeps for food and cooks it on a mud stove. He serves the curried chicken with rice, and later his guests have bananas for dessert, which he picks from his neighbor's yard.

Married with three daughters, ages 3-15, the 30-something Mongala and his family belong to the Adivasi, or tribal, community. His wife forages for food and wood in the forest. His mother, Budari, lives with them. The family numbers among India's minority Catholic community.

"We live a very simple life," says Budari. "The forest gives us everything we need — food, shelter and wood to keep our home warm.

"Life as an Adivasi is a struggle but being Christian gives me a lot of relief from stress," she says, adding how she loves church hymns.



The livelihood of the Adivasi in Chhattisgarh state includes raising cattle and growing rice. (Photo: Sajeendran V.S. - CNEWA)

Adivasi, a Sanskrit word meaning “original inhabitants,” are the Indigenous people of India, also known as tribals. They compose 8.6 percent of the subcontinent’s general population — or 104.3 million people, according to the most recent census in 2011 — and are the largest Indigenous group in the world.

There is great diversity among the Adivasi. A government survey conducted 31 years ago identified 635 distinct Adivasi tribes and 447 tribal languages. The largest number lives in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Tribals are numerous in Chhattisgarh as well, representing about a third of its population of just over 25 million. Here, the Adivasi communities speak Gondi, Halbi and Kurukh.

As with other Indigenous groups, Adivasi history is marked by discrimination and marginalization. The Dalits, last in the Indian caste system and known as “untouchables,” are another traditionally marginalized community in India. The Indian government refers to Dalits as “scheduled castes.” Many of the Adivasi tribes, who were never part of the traditional caste system, are referred to as “scheduled tribes.”

Traditionally, the Adivasi are hunters and gatherers who live in forested areas and practice animism, worshiping nature and the spirit of their ancestors. However, a minority embraced Christianity during British rule — a trend that continued post-independence with the arrival of Christian missionaries.

“Over the decades, the Church has been instrumental in the progress made in the tribal communities.”

According to the 2011 census, Christians number 27.8 million in India, representing 2.3 percent of the total population. Of these, tribal Christians number 10.03 million, up from 6.3 million 10 years earlier. In 2021, a Pew Research study indicated 74 percent of Christians in India identify with the lower castes, among them 33 percent as scheduled castes and 24 percent as scheduled tribes.

The nation’s largest denomination is Catholic, representing 37 percent of the country’s Christians. Adivasi are the majority in some Catholic dioceses and eparchies, and many Adivasi students in Church-run schools and colleges are second generation.

However, the development of the forestry sector under British rule caused a shift in the traditional lifestyle of the tribals to horticulture, terrace cultivation and animal husbandry. Since Indian independence in 1947, an estimated 30 million Adivasi have been displaced from their traditional lands by infrastructure and economic development projects, such as dams, mines and highways, leading to increased poverty among these communities. Government statistics show nearly half the Adivasi population currently lives below the poverty line, earning less than \$12 a month.

Magaly, a member of the Catholic Adivasi community in Chhattisgarh, weaves and sells baskets to earn a living. She is in her 50s but is not sure of her age. As with many Adivasi, she does not have a birth certificate or other documentation indicating when she was born. She sells each basket for 12 cents. In a big city, the baskets she weaves would sell for \$3.

"We are very poor," Magaly says. "Life is a struggle. There's never enough money for food or clothes or to even get the hut repaired."

Magaly's hut has a hole in its roof, which lets in water when it rains and cold in the winter.



Adivasi mothers in Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh state. (Photo: Sajeendran V.S. - CNEWA)

"The incentives for adopting Christianity have been many," says the Fr. Shinod Chacko, a Syro-Malabar Catholic priest from the southern Indian state of Kerala, who has dedicated his ministry to the welfare of the Adivasi.

His primary pastoral responsibility in the Eparchy of Jagdalpur is to accompany people who have recently embraced the faith. Jagdalpur is one of the seven Syro-Malabar Catholic eparchies in Chhattisgarh.

“Christianity has encouraged tribals to send their children to school, especially girls,” he says. “The Church has also guided them toward new agricultural techniques, so they earn more money.”

“There are fewer alcohol-related problems among those who are Catholic, such as domestic violence and mental health issues,” he adds.

Fr. Masu Karma, pastor of Holy Name of Jesus Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in Kurenga, also in Chhattisgarh, cares for the 35 Catholic families in the village and says Christians, nevertheless, face numerous challenges and trials for their faith.

“The tribals here are troubled and abused for being Christian,” he says.

The growth of Christianity among tribal and Dalit communities in the past century has sparked waves of violence against Christians by Hindu nationalists. Christians have been beaten, killed, forced to “reconvert” to Hinduism or coerced to leave their villages. Often, police take no action against the perpetrators.

“The forest gives us everything we need – food, shelter and wood to keep our home warm.”

Hindu nationalists equate being Indian with being Hindu, and view Dalits and Adivasi as Hindu, despite the insistence of many Dalits and Adivasi that they are not.

While the Indian constitution guarantees freedom of religion and affirms India as a secular nation, 12 Indian states had adopted anti-conversion legislation as of December 2024.

National and foreign human rights groups have recorded a growing number of anti-Christian attacks in recent years.

The United Christian Forum, based in New Delhi, recorded 834 instances of anti-Christian violence in the country in 2024, compared with 127 a decade earlier.

In Chhattisgarh – where the state announced its intention in January to make its anti-conversion legislation more stringent – 165 attacks against Christians were documented last year.

In June, for instance, in southern Chhattisgarh, in a village close to Jagdalpur, a mob of vigilantes attacked Christian families. At least two Christian men were knocked unconscious, and three others suffered severe injuries. Christian families were banished from the village and made to sign a statement agreeing they would practice Hinduism within 10 days.



Sister Sincy Thomas of the Snehagiri Missionary Sisters husks rice with a tribal woman in Koleng, a village in Chhattisgarh state. (Photo: Sajeendran V.S. - CNEWA)

In January 2023, in Narayanpur, about 77 miles northwest of Jagdalpur, a mob of 2,000 people gathered to protest the alleged religious conversion of tribals by Christian missionaries. After the protest, the mob attacked the church with stones and sickles. Two weeks earlier, when at least a thousand Christian tribals went to the local administration in Narayanpur to seek protection from acts of targeted violence, they were jailed.

“We’re punished for being Christian,” says Father Masu. “But the truth is ever since we came to Jesus, our lives have improved tremendously. We are all united in our religion and we’ll fight religious discrimination rather than give up our faith.”

“The situation is only going to get worse,” says Father Shinod. “The attacks on religious minorities are likely to increase in frequency in the foreseeable future.”

“We are called for mission work,” he adds. “We have immense faith in Jesus. Despite difficulties and obstacles, God has his own ways to make things happen.”

The Syro-Malabar Catholic bishop of Jagdalpur, Mar Joseph Kollamparambil, says the “idea that missionary work is all about conversion is false.”

“Over the decades, the Church has been instrumental in the progress made in the tribal communities,” says the bishop, originally from Kerala, who came to serve in Chhattisgarh in 1976.

This progress includes road construction, education, skills-training in tailoring, carpentry, masonry and agriculture, and better health facilities for mothers and infants.

“This is a Christian mission. This is our vocation,” says the bishop. “Every day we spend time in prayer and contemplation that God is with us.”

A thick fog hangs over Marayoor, a hill station in the southern Indian state of Kerala. While most of Kerala is swelteringly humid, with 90-degree temperatures, Marayoor in December is only 10 degrees, not including the wind chill. The weather is unpredictable with dense fog and rain from June until February.

Despite the cold, women of the Muthuvan tribe are busy picking tea leaves in the immaculately maintained gardens. Marayoor is known for its tea — most estates are now owned by big brands — and is famous for a special variety of molasses.

Almost half a million Adivasi in Kerala, representing 1 percent of the state’s population, live in the sandalwood forests.

Projects to increase the social empowerment of tribal communities classified as “scheduled tribes” in the Indian constitution, including the Muthuvan, are the responsibility of the government, which imposes restrictions on other individuals and organizations, including the Church, regarding the work they can do with tribal communities.

“The tribals here in Marayoor are well looked after by the government,” says Sister Joel Mathew, C.S.N., a member of the Sisters of Nazareth.

“The tribals in Kerala don’t migrate to other places. They stay put,” she says. “They see themselves as protectors of the forest. The government clears the forest for them and gives them land for agriculture.”

The community in Marayoor lives by their own rules. They have their own councils headed by a leader called a “mooppan.” Most disputes are resolved by the mooppan and rules and laws are made by consensus generally.

“One of the things they’ve come up with is to have one child per family, so a lot of couples have just one child,” says Sister Joel.



Sisters Treasa Paul and Joel Mathew visit the home of their Adivasi students, who live in a tribal colony in Kerala. (Photo: Sajeendran V.S. - CNEWA)

The Sisters of Nazareth established their convent, St. Michael Giri, in Marayoor in 1969, and then built two boarding schools for Adivasi children. Fifty boys attend St. Michael's Boys Home and 29 girls attend St. Michael's Girls Home. An upper primary school until seventh grade provides education for children in the language of their choice: either Tamil, English or Malayalam.

"Most children come from broken families where either the mother or the father has left the family. Most families also have alcohol-related problems where money is being spent on drinking rather than on the family," says Sister Joel. "Once they come to us, we're able to give them a relatively stable life."

The sisters receive a monthly stipend from the government toward the children's food, health care and medicines, as well as assistance from CNEWA.

While the Muthuvans practice animism, the state identifies them officially as Hindu. The local communist government also implements policies to ensure they remain Hindu, forbidding priests from visiting and talking to the tribals about Christianity for fear of religious influence.

"You need permission from the forest officer to go into tribal settlements," says Sister Treasa Paul, C.S.N., convent superior. "They're wary of outsiders, especially foreigners. They feel threatened if there's the slightest doubt that someone might preach to the Adivasi."

The sisters, however, have a good rapport with the local administration. They educate the children and work with the tribals on women's empowerment, irrespective of their religion.

"Once upon a time, women would work in the fields but were not allowed to take the produce to a market," says Sister Treasa. "In time we've made them understand that it's important for women to be able to earn a living, too."

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21 March 2025, 13:55