

An NGO for Tribal Welfare.

Sadhgraha

A Humanitarian Initiative to Provide Homes for the Tribal Community.

1. The total population of Kerala, the southern most state of India, is 40 million people. 400,000 people, ie 1.2% of the total population are tribals.

What are tribals?

Tribal people are people indigenous to the land. For generations they have been born into the same area/land and have stayed there. The land is occupied by them and belongs to them. They farm it by whatever means they have available, they rear animals, mainly goats, chickens, rabbits, some have cows. They have no money, in the form of currency, they only have their land and live-stock. When they need money, they sell an animal. They have no bank accounts.

They know their forests and the plants and they forage and eat from the forest- coconuts, mangoes, berries, bananas, pineapples, and they grow rice, the ones that can.

The second group of people consist of the general population, who are not tribal people, but have migrated from other places, eg neighbouring states like Tamil Nadu.

Tribal people in Kerala, live in 3 main districts: Wayanadu, which has the highest population, Palakkad and Idukki.

Attapady is the tribal belt in Palakkad. The main tribes in Attapady are: Irula, Maduga and Kurumba- these are the original indigenous population of Kerala.

Administration in Attapady

Attapady is administered by 3 groups of Panchayats (Councils). These are Agali, Pudur and Sholayur. These Panchayats represent both the general population and the tribal population. The general population have money, education and resources, whilst the tribal people do not. The tribal people also have their own representatives which have been chosen as a family lineage. These are called the Oorukkootam, and are an informal group of representatives of the tribal people who liaise with the Panchayats.

2. The Tribal dilemma.

The general population who are not tribal and migrated into the tribal land areas, procured the best land for their own commercial agricultural practices. They illegally bought the land with the help of the Panchayats, they occupied it, without permission from the tribals. They took advantage of the fact that the tribals were uneducated and had minimal resources. The tribal mentality is to cultivate their land for their own needs, if they don't need, they don't cultivate.

The best agricultural lands went into the hands of the general population. Many of the tribals lost their lands without realising what was happening, until it was too late. This was systematic exploitation.

Tribals were left with land which is not as fertile or able to be cultivated. This drastic change led to life style changes and living and food habits, which has resulted in health issues and diseases, such as nutritional deficiencies, sick cell anaemia, tuberculosis, and high infant mortality rates. Tribals earn money, when they need it, through unskilled labour jobs.

The Panchayats are supposed to serve the tribal population as well as the general population. However, the reality is that they do not give value to tribal issues.

The State Govt of Kerala allocates huge funds to the Panchayats for developing tribal infrastructure, but a very small portion of the money ever reaches these populations, most is eaten up by the politicians/bureaucrats in between.

3. HRDS INDIA

Background

HRDS India is an NGO focussing on tribal welfare.

The founder, Aji Krishnan, was a social activist and reformist since his childhood. He was born in Kottayam, in south west Kerala, where he grew up amongst farmers and the agrarian communities. His father was also a social reformist, and his mother a teacher.

Aji Krishnan supported social causes and disempowered communities while at University and was arrested and imprisoned, as a result of participating in demonstrations against social injustice. He became, not only, a spokesperson for supporting disenfranchised communities, but also an action oriented head for social change.

When HRDS India was first formed, in 1997, their main activities were providing skill empowerment for the poor, women empowerment projects, and tribal development and child help projects. HRDS India has successfully developed more than 3500 self help groups across India. They also implemented the 'Micro credit initiative HRDS India and Gramin Bank of Bangladesh', a financing program set up by the Nobel Prize winner, Dr Mohammed Younis.

In 2012, Dr S.Krishna Kumar, former Union Minister of Kerala, became a patron of HRDS India, and in 2014, Krishna Kumar officially joined hands with HRDS India and became the President of the organisation.

Sadhgraha is the name of the initiative for the development of Tribal Housing started by HRDS India.

HRDS India realised through their grass roots work within these communities, the tribal population's basic needs were of secure and upgraded housing. These communities needed assistance beginning from basic housing, electricity, water and gas, for their families.

The general tribal housing structure is a thatched hut with outlying thatched shelters for their animals, or mortar and brick houses provided to a few tribal families by the government.

3-4 families live in one dwelling, grandparents, parents, children with their spouses and children, if they have them.

The houses provided by HRS India are for a single family of 2 parents and 2-3 children, consisting of 2 bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen and living room area.

HRDS India houses are made of fibre cement board, which are eco friendly and easy to maintain. The house roofs are made of aluminium and the floors are made of ceramic tiles. Most of these materials are transported from Gujarat, India. An HRDS India house takes a total of 12 days to construct.

HRDS India houses are given to tribal families with full interiors, furniture and everything required for the family to start living in them immediately, including a fully functioning kitchen.

House with contents costs \$6900. HRDS India provides maintenance and repairs of the houses they give for 10 years. A house, with correct maintenance lasts for 20-25 years.

2018 Kerala floods

Kerala state is made up of 14 districts. 12 of these 14 districts were affected by heavy flooding in August 2018. The cause was heavy rains which led to the bursting of dam shutters and water flooded and submerged houses, farms, buildings, schools, animals, people etc Floods lasted until November 2018.

The local population, as well as becoming homeless, were also heavily exposed to diseases. People were re situated in existing, non flood affected schools and camps, similar to refugee camps.

During this time, many private donors came forward, as well as Aji Krishnan, and donated land to tribal people for building new houses. Once the house is built, then the land is officially registered onto the name of the family who occupies the house.

HRDS India carry out regular follow ups with these families for 10 years after they have been given the houses.

HRDS India housing application process

HRDS India's vision in Kerala is to construct 24,000 houses for tribals, so far 1000 houses are under construction.

HRDS India employs people to work with them in tribal communities from within the tribal communities.

These tribal communities speak their own dialects of Malayalam (the language of Kerala).

1. These employees interact with the tribal communities with regular visits, and during this time they identify the needs of the families they serve.

They provide application forms for receiving a new house to the homeless indigenous population, family by family.

2. The application form is completed by the head of the family and returned with required documents to the HRDS India office. These required documents include land ownership certification, a valid ration card, community certificate proving that they belong to the ST (Scheduled Tribe/Indigenous community).

The tribal family must own their own land on which the house will be constructed, hence a land ownership certificate is mandatory.

3. The HRDS India office, then examines the application and publishes a final list of applicants who are in genuine need of housing.

The time taken between approval of application and receiving their new house depends upon availability of funds.

(photos and videos of process, 2 videos here in HRDS India office).

Karshaka Project

The tribal population owns land. However, not all of this land is able to be cultivated, for various reasons, most importantly they need access to a regular water supply.

HRDS India launched the Karshaka Project in October 2019.

This project was set up to help the tribal people to cultivate their lands for growing medicinal plants. This allows the tribal communities to have a sustainable livelihood.

The general, non tribal populations occupy lands which are fertile and cultivable, the tribals, generally occupy lands which are dry and difficult to cultivate.

HRDS India aims to help them convert the land from uncultivable to cultivable.

They will introduce land irrigation methods through the "drip irrigation program", using the Kabani river as a source of water, as well as water harvesting methods with rain water.

There are, potentially 5000 acres of tribal land available for cultivation of medicinal plants in this way.

Sustainable Process

Tribal people own their own lands. These people will be given support by HRDS India, for cultivating their own land. They will be taught skills and methods of cultivation and paid a monthly salary to work on their own lands.

Once these medicinal plants are harvested, they will be sold to companies as raw materials for their products, eg Ayurvedic medicines.

Tribal people will receive a profit share from the plants sold according to the proportion of the land they are cultivating.

The Karashka project sets up a business for tribals: helping them to learn knowledge and skills for cultivating their own land from specialists in this field, allowing them to earn a regular salary from labouring on their own land, and helping them to sell their medicinal plants to appropriate companies.

The overall aim is to make tribal people economically self reliant, to motivate them to sustain their own lands and to discourage migration of rural tribal populations into urban areas.

HRDS India Volunteer Program

HRDS India has set up a volunteer program for people interested in helping with the Sadhgraha housing project and/or the Karashaka land cultivation project for tribal welfare.

Volunteers from all countries and within India are welcome to join the HRDS India teams and have hands on experience of working in a structured, organised and safe environment with some of the oldest indigenous tribes in the world.

Volunteers will be provided with comfortable, clean and safe accommodation close to the HRDS India offices in the tribal areas, as well as food/meals for a reasonable donation to HRDS India. (Photos of accommodation).