

Village Service Trust

Newsletter Summer 2024

A festival of sport marks anniversary of death of John Wilson

VST's partner NWTWS remembered their founder last month with a weekend football tournament for the tribal communities of Nilgiris and Wynaad districts



A team of young players prepare to show off their skills and training

The Nilgiris Wynaad Tribal Welfare Society is based near the town of Ambalamoola in the depths of the UNESCO designated Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, nestled between the borders of the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The NGO was founded in 1978 by John Wilson, originally to provide free medical care to the hill tribe inhabitants of the region. In the years since, the campus has built a 12 bed in-patient ward and expanded its activities to community outreach and development in the local villages.

May 11th marked the third anniversary of John's passing. NWTWS hosted a memorial football tournament for the tribal people in the area. Over the weekend, on a pitch surrounded by pristine sub-tropical jungle, fourteen local teams competed for the trophy and bragging rites. The boys all played with great passion and the standard of skills was very impressive.

It was a rare occasion to bring over 150 local tribal men to come together and celebrate. These are tough times for most of these young people as they struggle to navigate severe disruption to their traditional culture. They are torn between preserving their way of life whilst integrating with modern society. Many of them take great pride in their style, wearing the modern footballer inspired "pollingal" mullet haircuts and the baggy t-shirts and slacks that you would just as likely see in the skater cultures of urban metropolis' all over the world.

Unfortunately, the rainy season came early this year and torrential thunderstorms made the pitch unplayable on the second day. The finals were postponed by a weekend but everyone was in great spirits. These kinds of activities are a hugely important part of maintaining the solidarity and community of the tribal people, who are categorised under the Scheduled Tribes and Castes Act of 1989.



Tribal people struggle to integrate as mainstream society encroaches on their traditional way of life

Ned Tinne reflects on his visit to villages where an ancient culture is at odds with the modern world

Today, as one drives along the perfectly conditioned modern roads and past the large second homes of wealthy Keralans, one wouldn't know that down the side trails and into the forest are hundreds of small villages that have been inhabited by tribal communities for thousands of years.

There are four main tribes from the Nilgiris Wynaad region called the Paniya, Kattunayaka, Betta Kurumba and Mullu Kurumba. These tribes have lived in the forest, separate from the rest of society, until India began to take shape as a modern nation-state. They are now engaged in a critical struggle to simultaneously preserve their culture and hold on to their land whilst integrating with the modern society that is rapidly developing around, and imposing itself upon them.

The tribal people have been historically isolated from the rest of mainstream Indian society and so have distinctive religious and mythological beliefs and practices. They are animists and pantheists, believing there are spirits living amongst them in the elements of nature in their surrounding environment. They are deeply connected to their ancestors, whose spirits they honour with regular ritual worship in their shrines, often based around a tree.

In recent years, the modern state has funded the building of Hindu temples in the area. It is complicated because Hindu religion and traditional tribal beliefs are generally non-exclusive and not, in principle, incompatible. However, this is a clear attempt from the modern state to assimilate the tribal people into the mainstream society and alienate them from their traditional way of life.

Before the modern state, everyone lived on and shared the land. The notion of legally owning a defined plot of land was completely alien and in fact counter to the way the tribals relate to their environment. However, as wealthy modern people came, armed with their legal contracts, they gradually bought up more and more of the land, often then turning it into plantations and then employing the local traditional inhabitants. On the other side there is the government and the Forest Department. The Mudumalai National Park



A tribal elder shows off her traditional pineapple leaf stretched ears. This practice is one of many under threat from modernisation.

Meanwhile for young boys the forest life has its attractions.

covers a large swathe of the traditional tribal territory. The tribal people have been pushed into increasingly narrow and controlled living spaces. The government is now planning to create a "buffer zone" which may push more families further out of their traditional villages into the already cramped area towards the West.

When NWTWS was founded in 1978, the activities were based around providing basic health services. Now the priorities are to empower the tribal people to integrate with the system that is encroaching in on them. Ultimately, this means that the youth need to

go to school to learn about how modern society works. If they don't know their rights then they will continue to be exploited. The challenge is to communicate this to the families and convince them to cooperate in encouraging the children to go to school instead of staying in the forest. That is why children's school attendance and retention is one of the current priorities for NWTWS.

The plan therefore is to try and replicate the success of our partner Arogya Agam in establishing a network of children's clubs. We need to coordinate with the parents in the villages, many of whom are themselves

illiterate, to support the youngsters to stay in school.

The four tribes mentioned are officially categorised as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), which means the government recognises that they have particular rights that need to be upheld. A big challenge for our partners is helping the tribal people register with the various government benefit services. We have generally been successful in getting the vast majority of tribals registered with Aadhar cards (identity cards) but many are lacking birth certificates and community certificates, which they need in order to be granted land ownership and employment in government schemes. NWTWS have a very good reputation in the area and all the locals still refer to the campus medical ward as the "Sahib hospital". Sahib means "white man" and was the term affectionately used throughout the area to refer to John Wilson. Chandran and Sassi are two local tribals who conduct most of the field site visits to collect data and consult with the local villagers. They have been working hard to gather data across 138 villages. Most of the data has been gathered and the challenge now is to start coordinating a federation of women's self-help groups. The trouble is that the villages are dispersed across a wide and dense jungle.

The tribal people have a distinct cultural identity and their ancestors know countless secrets about how to live off the land and in harmony with the environment. Our partners are hoping to collaborate with the locals to preserve that knowledge and identity through running workshops to educate the next generation about their ancestral knowledge.

NWTWS programme directors are fairly new to their roles and we are very much looking forward to working with them in the future to implement their new projects. There are many challenges ahead and the trend is for more funds and programmes to come through support from businesses rather than local NGOs.

We met a group of young social work students who were staying with NWTWS as summer interns. The passion, energy and understanding was there and they were well aware of the challenges they face to protect marginalised groups in this critical historical juncture. We wish them well and look forward to continuing the fight alongside them.



Girls at the hostel are more receptive to staying in school

As well as running an in-patient medical ward on the campus, NWTWS runs hostels for youngsters who, for whatever reasons, are not able to be looked after by their families. They currently have thirteen boys and fourteen girls staying in their hostels for summer camp.

When chatting with the youngsters we found that there is great variability in how they respond to our encouraging them to go to school. The girls tend to be more receptive to staying in school and going on to higher education. Many of them aspire to do nursing training and live in bigger towns or cities. Some of the girls have even gone on to become social workers themselves and help in running NGOs to defend tribal people's rights. Many of the boys are more ambivalent though and want to remain in the forest.

It is a confusing time because they are exposed to, and are influenced by, all the extravagances of modern society with sports stars and celebrities. Some of them are more drawn to that than others and it is vital that organisations like those of our partners are there to provide support for these vulnerable groups as they navigate this disruption.

Rural India's women's self-help groups join the digital revolution

With smartphone access rapidly expanding in India, the women we support are taking full advantage

India is home to some of the world's biggest IT companies: think Infosys and Wipro, and there's plenty more that are not household names. So it should not be too surprising to learn that the humble Indian village women's self-help groups have begun to embrace today's digital technology.

Keeping accounts records has always been at the heart of running a self-help group. Members make monthly contributions and take loans, and the group itself engages with banks and other lenders. All these require keeping accurate accounts. Each group's accountant, with her record books and careful recording of transactions, is an essential feature of every group's monthly meeting.

Smartphone access has expanded so rapidly that they are becoming a common sight even in the rural villages of southern India. All of the self-help groups we support now at least have one smartphone to share between them and they are ready and willing to join the global digital revolution. Our partner Arogya Agam developed a phone app with an agency in Bangalore. The simple-to-use app records transactions, attendance and meeting minutes. Almost all of the 290 groups, with almost 5,000 members, have adopted the new system.



A self-help group records their accounts through the federation app

Introducing digital accounts is not without challenges. The data still has to be entered accurately and ways of checking have to be developed. Gaining familiarity with the system takes time both for the SHG leaders and Arogya Agam staff. To get the full benefits all the groups and banks have to be on board.

The digitisation of India's economy is already under way, and being pushed hard by the current government. Even in rural villages, more and more transactions are being done by scanning a QR code than with cash. It is new territory but this is a great opportunity for the SHGs to streamline themselves into this rapidly growing Indian economy.

"Our time spent discussing the monthly finances has greatly reduced. Now we can focus more on women's empowerment and village issues."

- One group leader

The app brings some important benefits:

- All group members can easily see the accounts, including loans and deposits.
- It is cheaper and more convenient than storing and updating information on paper.
- NGO staff can see a group's accounts without having to travel to the field.
- It is a convenient and reliable format to show banks and other lenders when they are making lending decisions.
- Easily accessible information about self-help group members helps with accessing government welfare programmes.



GlobalGiving

Our Global Giving project is off to a fantastic start. We had a great campaign with Little By Little and now with our Chair Sophie Walker completing her All Points North cycling challenge, we have raised over \$5,200. **We are now looking ahead to the July 10th bonus day where we can receive up to 40% matches on big donations.** If we pull together we can take advantage of this great opportunity.

To view our page and spread the word see: <https://goto.gg/61393>

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