



NTFP

INDIA

REVISITING FIRST FRUIT CEREMONIES:

Crisis in the cornerstone of Indigenous knowledge
and a possible way out

Written by Madhu Ramnath

PRELUDE

During my recent stay in an adivasi village in Surguja district, northern Chhattisgarh, an old woman had died. The concerned family got together and made preparations for the last rites and, by late evening, everything was over and done. Even the rituals to be performed over the next few days by the community – in particular by the kinsmen – were completed that very day. All the customs of bereavement, including the shaving of heads, was over.

I inquired why the mourning rituals were fast-tracked and was told that *tendu patta*¹ harvest was beginning the following day. Nobody in the village wanted to miss out on that, and the community pushed or helped the bereaved family into completing all death-related obligations as quick as they could. True enough, people went into the forest early next morning and worked all day – whole families, including children as the schools were closed for the summer vacation – collecting tendu leaves and filling them in sacks. This continued for a week or so until there was a break for a few days, apparently to allow some time for new leaves to sprout, and then it continued.

Chhattisgarh produces about 20% of the country's tendu leaves, more than any other state. In 2024, it sold about Rs 942 crores worth of leaves, more than the Rs 793.39 crores of the previous year.² There were 1.4 million collectors. During my visit, people worked through the day and collected enough leaves to earn at least Rs 1000/day.

The death of the woman and the response of the village community to not be deterred in its tendu patta spree was unusual. I have been in adivasi villages when festivals have been delayed due to death in the village, in one case even a serious illness caused people to pause in their celebration. Though tendu patta was not a product of local use to adivasi communities – there are no rituals attached to it or the tree – this incident made me revisit the concept of first fruit ceremonies in a broader sense.

WHAT ARE FIRST FRUIT CEREMONIES?

As I have mentioned elsewhere³, first fruit ceremonies are markers in the calendar when the first harvest of a fruit or grain happens. Much of literature focuses on the ritual for cultivated plants and refer to the first offering of grain, as a thanksgiving, as with the Jewish *bikkurim*⁴ or the Pongal festival of the Tamils. In this paper I shift the perspective to primarily wild foods, especially those from the forests, and the first fruit ceremonies as practised by the adivasi peoples, especially the Durwa peoples of central India.

THE MANGO AND COMMENSALITY

One of the most important of first fruit ceremonies in central India is that of the mango. Mango is a predominant tree that characterises central Indian forests, along with the sal (*Shorea robusta*); the tree is found all over the Indian subcontinent and many parts of Asia. The fruit is eaten and relished by humans as well as a variety of animals. Fortunately, the mature seed of the fruit germinates easily and all one needs to do is to take care that the fruit ripens sufficiently before being harvested and consumed.

About four decades ago it was common for the village elders – there was no 'formal' gram sabha then – to wander about their nearby forests and observe the mango trees to fix a date that would allow for a maximum of ripe fruit. An added caution was that the birds and animals didn't cut too much into the human share. The focus of date-setting was the *ripe* fruit, that which would ensure *mature* seeds, and hence maximize regeneration. Such a system of date-setting, by consulting the mango trees in the forest, and not a priest or a Hindu almanac as in contemporary times, ensured that there were mango plants of all ages in the forest, assuring the people of a constant supply of the fruit for generations to come.

The ripe fruit was mainly eaten as it was, and different sections of the forest were visited for mangos that offered specific tastes. Many of the locally known mangos had names that described

their quality and appearance, that were visible and tangible only when they matured. When they were raw and immature they remained green, of course with some variation in shape, but mostly uniform in taste and sub-optimal.

The dates for the first fruit ceremonies differed from village to village, depending on their terrain, the elevation, and when the mango ripened locally within those summer weeks. The hill villages celebrated the mango festival later than the plains villages, as their mangos ripened later, usually by a week or so.

'Celebrating' the first fruit ceremony is synonymous to 'tasting' the mango, the words used almost interchangeably. However, a crucial aspect of celebrating any first fruit ceremony is that it renders one 'impure' within the social group. This means that commensality between people who have completed the ceremony and those who have yet to taste the fruit is broken. The longer a community holds back the ceremony – allowing more mango fruit to ripen, and hence seeds to mature – the longer they remain in a 'purer' state. This entailed that when they visited people who had performed the first fruit ceremony they had to cook and eat separately, as the 'pure' could not mix with the 'impure'. It is this matter of *purity*, and how long a community can, or wants to, maintain this state, that exerts a force parallel to that of the mango seed's ability to regenerate, which together decide the date for the first fruit ceremony. In a nutshell, it is a tussle between ecology and commensality, the latter noun encompassing aspects of mobility, commerce and social events.

It is important to note that first fruit ceremonies for all forest produce that were performed customarily, as explained below, exerted a similar pressure on the adivasi communities, showing up explicitly in their commensality. The latter aspect is linked to mobility.

BEYOND THE MANGO

Other than mango, first fruit ceremonies are performed for several other fruit as well as certain seeds, flowers, shoots and leaves. Some of the leaves are used to fashion leaf cups and platters for daily needs – kondi, pela, boddel⁵, for instance – whose ceremonies fall between July and September, during the monsoon. All these plants are deciduous, and the timings of the ceremony ensure that the new flush has enough time to mature and be used to make sturdy containers, without harming the plant. Most of these first fruit ceremonies are celebrated as festivals that also mark points in the agricultural calendar, in that some agricultural activity commences or closes with them. Gunnel⁶ brings ploughing and sowing activities to an end in late July; the leaves associated with it are those of boddel (*Butea*) and (*kirva*) *Glochidion*. Likewise, Kolthel marks the end of weeding, when the first of the grain ripens; the plants associated are *Holarhenna*, *Dillenia* and *Semecarpus*, along with tamarind.

Some first fruit ceremonies that concern seeds (*admuki*, *Bauhinia vahlii*) or shoots (bamboo, essentially *Dendrocalamus strictus*) which, instead of dealing directly with the first harvest, refer to related processes. In the case of *admuki*, custom prescribes that the seeds may be roasted and eaten outdoors (meaning in the forest) until the festival of Welkel; bamboo shoots may be harvested when they are available (when monsoon commences) but may not be dried and stored until Kolthel. Such practices are nuances within the main first fruit ceremony and which, in modern times, have fallen out of fashion in most villages near towns.

My contention with first fruit ceremonies and their nuances is three-fold: one, that they pertained to plants that were used extensively by adivasi communities; two, the ceremonies are direct responses to their ecology (especially the timing of seed maturation, leaf-fall and first flush, etc.); and three, that these ceremonies were initially part of the life-cycles of wild plants and only later incorporated into rituals involving cultivated plants. I shall attempt to touch upon some of these points in the course of this paper.

1 Tendu leaf; *Diospyros melanoxylon*, used to wrap tobacco for 'bidis' or Indian cigarettes. The tendu leaf has been traditionally one of the many leaves used for bidis, and also for leaf plates.

2 https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/tendu-leaves-collection-increases-20-this-season-in-chhattisgarh-124081100647_1.html

3 Ramnath, M. (https://www.india-seminar.com/2018/702/702_madhu_ramnath.htm); Ramnath, M. (2015): Woodsmoke and Leafcups: autobiographical notes to the anthropology of the Durwa people. Harper Collins, New Delhi

4 <https://www.thetorah.com>

5 *Semecarpus anacardium*, *Holarhenna antidysentrica* and *Butea monosperma*, respectively

6 The Halbi term used for this festival is 'Amas' Tiyaar

THE SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

In practical terms, a community's sphere of influence is as far as it travels. Ideas and customs, and the changing trends in behaviour, all depend on interactions between people in a community and between communities. The villages and societies that I am writing about were isolated about forty years ago, in that all travel was on foot; there were no cell-phones, and land phones were few, and limited to suburban and urban centres. People remained for a major part of the year (and their lives) within a 30 kilometre radius; they traveled, hunted and fished and gathered, and made social visits within this range. An important and obvious advantage of such a confined lifestyle was that the people knew, quite intimately, their terrain: every spring and stream, the slopes and the outsized rocks, the distribution of the trees and the movement of game, and the taste of meats during the different seasons were all familiar. One could say that the peoples way of life in the forest reflected, or was a response to, this knowledge.

Even about two decades ago there were but a few bicycles in the village. The villages and the communities that people dealt with were quite homogenous in that they lived in the same ecological zone, with similar kinds of forests, and were governed by the same norms.

Over the last two decades the road infrastructure has changed drastically. Alongside, the cell-phone has contributed to a more instantaneous mode of communication. People began to travel further than before; more vehicles came into the village; people bought motorcycles and, over time, there were fewer bicycles than motorcycles. In the village I write from (with about 100 households) the count today is over 60 motorcycles, two 4-wheelers, 5 tractor-trailers, an auto-rickshaw, and a pickup truck. There is a constant bustle of vehicles on the village streets and the youth, in the main, are always headed somewhere. The main town that is 35 kilometres away and which was seldom visited is now within the village's purview. People have built relationships with communities further away; people from far flung villages that were only known by name, now visit regularly, and bring along new ideas and customs, and real and imagined needs. Most telling are the bamboo poles with political flags that flutter from many homes.

Inevitably, the context of the village I am writing from has changed. From being part of a community of forested villages and people within a 30 kilometre radius it is now part of a much larger context. Where formerly, the village was couched within a forested landscape inhabited by similar peoples, it is now a part of a larger socio-ecological landscape that has people from other communities, and includes vast tracts of degraded forests, and urban areas that lack even that. In villages with scant or no forests, the first fruit ceremony for the mango is purely symbolic. And most of the first fruit ceremonies pertaining to 'less important' fruit than the mango, like chiri (*Buchnanania latifolia*), or leaves such as the musiri (*Dillenia pentagyna*), are not followed. Even the mango festival has no bearing on the state of the fruit, or the seeds, in such communities. The formality that is still followed – in that a first fruit ceremony is conducted – is nothing but the shell of a customary practice that was once embodied with meaning and relevance.

It is my contention, mainly based on decades of observation, that adivasi communities from such degraded landscapes have no stake in forest areas in their region and do not bother with the 'principles of conservation' established there by the people who inhabit them. In daily life this is evident by the constant complaints of people having some forests for their needs about those who come to steal their resources.

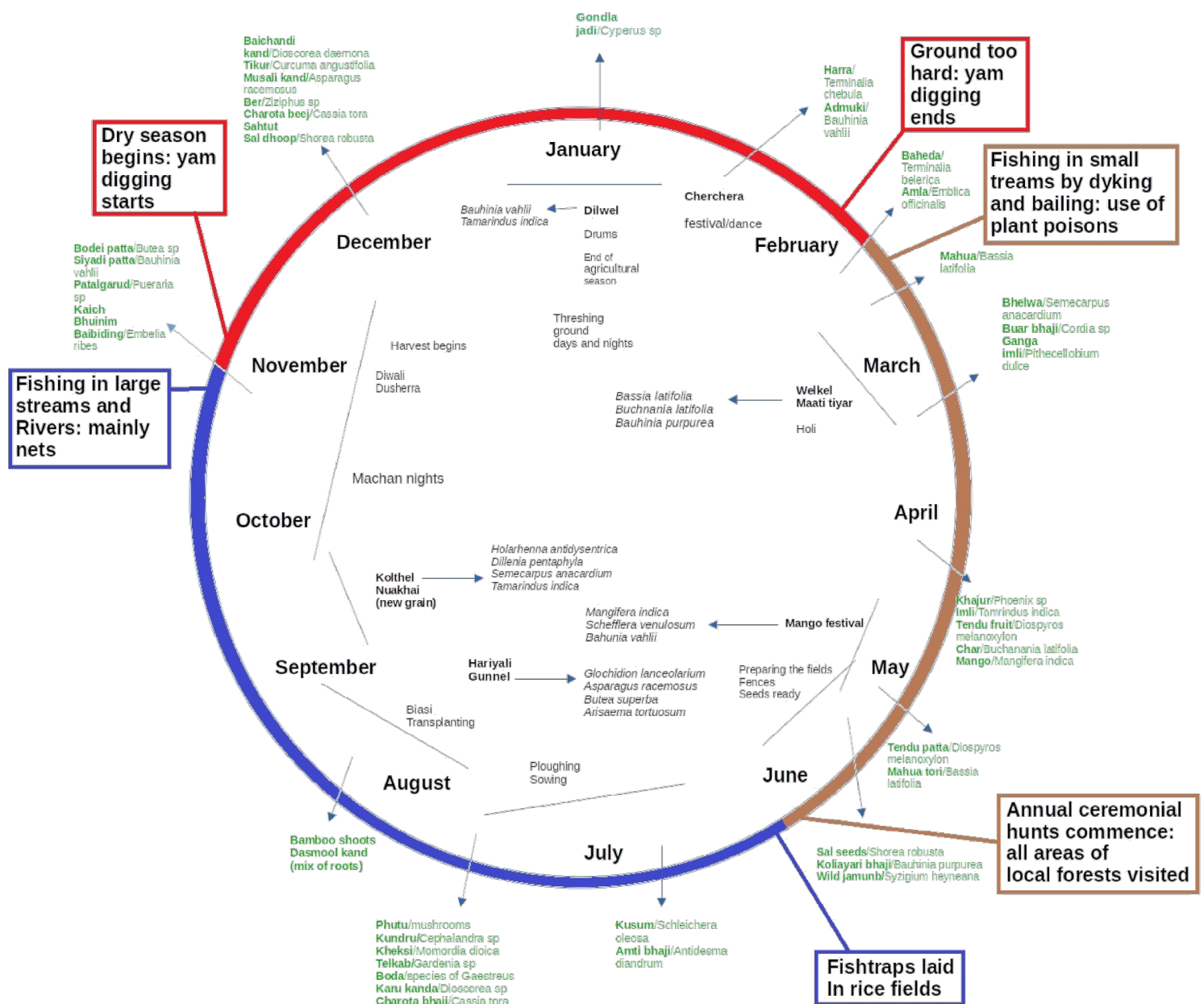


Figure showing first fruit ceremonies and the associated plants among the Durwa people of Bastar, India; also shown are festivals and seasons of food collection, including cultivation

THE TIMING OF THE MANGO FESTIVAL

The mangoes in central India begin to fruit from March onwards, and fully ripen after the second week of May. After mid-May, most of the mango seeds have matured and are able to regenerate. In many villages without any forests to speak of, the first fruit ceremony is performed even before the first week of April: the fruit is still raw and small then, and suitable only for *amchur*⁷ and the pickle industry. The moment the ceremony is over village communities begin harvesting the raw mango, skin and slice them, and put them out to dry. Like the *tendu patta* mentioned above, the mango too contributes to a sizeable part of the annual income of many families. However, when raw mango is harvested, there are no mature seeds. Every year that the mango is harvested early, that is before the seeds mature, we lose hundreds of thousands of seeds that could contribute to natural regeneration.

Between March and May the people in much of central India are in a festive mood. It is a period when marriages are performed, the various celebrations of seed sowing occur, other first fruit ceremonies like that of the mango happen, some of the annual hunts are led, and ceremonies for dead relatives are completed. It is a time when people travel to other villages, visit each other, and spend nights away from their homes. In the past, when the range of travel was limited – as people walked – the number of people and villages they visited were restricted. However, with the expanding infrastructure of transport, and the increase in private vehicles, the range of interaction between communities has also increased. In practical terms, this entails that people rid themselves of restrictions of commensality which allows them to be socially and ‘religiously’ on equal terms with their hosts. However, this in turn entails the completion of first fruit ceremonies along with ones neighbours. People cannot afford to, or restrict, where and with whom they may eat, especially when they are far away from home.

The question to ask is why do a people who know the ecological significance of first fruit ceremonies overlook them, or pass over their significance? In fact, these first fruit ceremonies are the core of traditional management of forests, focusing on species that are extensively used by the people, and therefore ‘creating’ customary laws that govern their use. These ecological facts are not just *known* by the adivasi peoples: in fact, their entire lifestyle may be seen as a conversation with forest phenomena, exemplified by their response to particular events, such as leaf-fall.⁸

To my question to the youth and elders in a couple of villages, about why we favour earlier dates for the mango festival despite knowing that it hinders regeneration, the answers were as follows:

- that the harvest and sale of raw mango allows old women and poor families to earn some income
- that it makes travel easier during the festive season as they can eat what is served by the host
- that it is better to join along with the communities that have finished the ceremony rather than isolate and restrict oneself and
- that guarding the mangos in one’s forest is difficult when neighbouring communities are out to get them.

None of the reasons given for adopting earlier dates was new, as similar circumstances prevailed in earlier times too: there were poor families, there was the need to travel and people did visit each other, and one guarded the forests from others who coveted our mango. Yet, the pressure from these same circumstances, in the new context of village communities in a much larger terrain, makes the once ‘isolated’ villages adjust to the new norms, norms that cater more to travel and commerce, and not the regeneration of a forest resource.

⁷ Powder made from dried raw mango, used in north Indian cuisine

⁸ Ramnath, M (2003); Tropical deciduous forests and the adivasi. Indigenous traditions as response to leaf fall in Bastar, India; Natural Resource Forum, Vol 27, Issue

ABOUT THE NUANCES OF FIRST FRUIT CEREMONIES

A part from the very clear rules of the first fruit ceremonies, when a certain fruit or leaf is used for the first time in the year, or when a flower is used to distill liquor⁹ or consumed as food¹⁰ there are several associated actions that pertain to the ceremonies. For instance, after the mango is tasted it is still a wait of a week or so before it can be cooked with gravy; the first mango dish is eaten in leafcups fashioned from admuki¹¹ leaves which have their stalk intact. After the bamboo shoots have been tasted there is a long wait before it can be smoke-dried and stored. And souring agents are added to dishes after certain specific rituals. These 'offshoots' of first fruit customs – that deal ostensibly with adivasi culture – have more implicit connotations on ecology and taste. The former point, ecology, seems to have a logical aspect, as those plants that are used extensively by a people also have an inherent custom that ensures their long-term sustainability. It is remarkable that, even in early times when the forests were relatively abundant, such rules and restrictions were in place and part of the cultures that inhabited these regions. There was an implicit understanding or experience, or foresight, in adivasi cultures, that various forest species could get over-exploited and such customary regulations were required as a collective response to safeguard them in the long run. These were the fundamental principles of sustainability, set in place long before "conservation" was an official term or practice, or became a necessity.

The latter aspect, taste, seems less obvious but I contend that it is equally important. In the same calendar that marks the harvest times of the different forest foods – aligned with the agricultural cycle – it is indicated when and for how long dishes are eaten dry, when cooked with gravy, and when souring agents are permitted. Likewise, the use of new items, such as fresh mahua or tamarind, whose tastes differ from the older ones (which are mellower), are also prescribed.

By studying the wild food-cultivated food calendar cycle one notices a broad division of tastes. The early spring to summer months are a period when sourness dominates foods: tamarind, mango, amti, benda¹² and red ants larvae, which eases into a brief period of sour-sweet of the kusum¹³ and jamun¹⁴ variety in the latter months, when the first rains come down to quench a parched earth. Then come the flavours of mushrooms and bamboo shoots, subtle and nuanced, and at times slightly acid, along with the various tastes of fish which merge with these. As the monsoon comes to a close and the dry season commences, the first yams are dug up, along with sweet potatoes and colocasia: the palate experiences a new range of flavours and texture, floury, gooey, stringy and a bland-to-bitter spectrum. The cold season is when the small game – especially giant squirrels and civets – have some fat on them, very different from the more chewy specimens that find their way to the pot during the summer months.

Each season brings along with it these tastes and flavours that tend to pervade the mood of the people. It would seem that the year is divided as much by weather and climate as by taste(s) to be welcomed, or those to let go for a few months. There are many ways to reckon time, outside of the Gregorian calendar: it could be the leaf-fall of a particular species, the appearance of a mushroom, or when one tastes the first bamboo-shoots of the year. Or where one was during that time of the year, sleeping outdoors on a machaan, a threshing ground, or indoors by a fire. There is a diversity of ways in which the world is experienced, and where it is experienced from.

⁹ Mahua, *Madhuca latifolia*; the mahua drink from new flowers will have to wait until after the Chaitra festival in April

¹⁰ Jirli, Sakena, *Indigofera cassioides* (eaten after the festival of Gunnel, end of sowing)

¹¹ *Bauhinia vahlii*

¹² amti, *Antidesma* sp., leaves used as souring agent; benda, *Hibiscus sabdariffa*, leaves and calyces similarly used

¹³ *Schleichera oleosa*

¹⁴ *Syzigium* sp.

THE CONCERN

What actually seems to be happening in adivasi India, and in other indigenous regions, is that influences from the new suburban “peripheries” dilute the rules and restrictions imposed by first fruit ceremonies in the inner (forested) villages. The youth in the latter villages increasingly look outwards, their aspirations no longer anchored to the norms and traditions set by a forest-based lifestyle, but adrift and uncertain in the current national and international socio-political scenario that they are little equipped to face. This is nothing to be surprised at. Digitalization and gadgets, the overwhelming amounts of inputs (that may be fake or non-relevant), the commodification of natural resources, the political leanings of village institutions that have inevitably splintered local groups working on local matters, have all contributed to the derailment of adivasi traditions and customs that was vibrant even two decades ago.

It will not be long before the implications of losing certain crucial aspects and practices of the adivasi peoples begin to be felt. Species-specific observations over many years and generations, and their relations to natural phenomena, like the link between the longer-than-usual stalks of mangos and more-than-usual rain that monsoon. Or when the earthworms appear on the ground being an indicator of an approaching winter. In some instances, such observations are formalized as common ‘sayings’ or riddles, and becomes a part of the local knowledge tradition. What I would like to remark on is not the supposed accuracy (or not) of such observations but the fact that such phenomena – length of mango stalks, the appearance of earthworms – are part of the consciousness of a culture.

Few conservationists, anthropologists or linguists have kept tabs on the range of inter-linked natural phenomena that adivasi customs, like the once ‘common’ first fruit ceremonies, touch upon. Such ceremonies refer to, and include, aspects of ethno-biology, ecology and language, among other fields, and whose grasp requires an engagement of decades if not generations. Contemporary social conditions are marked by the paucity of time, a poverty that affects all sections of society, and least conducive to acquiring these subtler forms of knowledge: their loss would be quite permanent. It is with the intention of conserving such knowledge, and customs that encapsulate such knowledge, that we require a conservation strategy.

A CONCLUDING NOTE

It is quite clear that most indigenous knowledge is very local and intimate, usually confined to small territories that a community frequents and lives in. The broader principles that one can derive from such knowledge, like the interlinkages between biological species, climatic phenomena, and the other dimensions of nature, can serve larger purposes. In our contemporary scenario, of a looming ecological and philosophical crisis, it could point to a way out of the confusions created by failed quick-fixes.

First fruit ceremonies are more than a concept, or a custom, that pertain to certain indigenous peoples and lend them a special status or identity. These are practices that have evolved over many generations, after observations of the impact on the forest of people using various species – for food, fibre, medicine, rituals, – in their daily lives. It is remarkable that even in very early times, when we suppose that forests were not very populated, such impacts had been observed and certain norms established to contain the damage. In effect, these are the modern-day harvest protocols, guiding the behaviour of forest-based peoples, by fixing dates for the harvest and judicious use of various (mainly) plant species that will ensure their regeneration and prevent over harvest.

Customs that pertain to fishing or hunting – when to go into a section of the forest, when to let the forest rest, which plant poison to use to stupefy fish – and how long to wait before gathering specific forest products, are essential conservation principles. Once these principles are grasped in their essence they can, with some effort, be worked upon to include a larger number of species and even other landscapes. Because these are generic principles that are based on the workings of nature, and fine-tuned to the human interventions that forests have been subjected to over the centuries. The latter point, that these principles have included the human factor, is of crucial importance, even if by “human” is meant forest-based peoples who trod lightly, and not an urban specimen.

A primary threat to the indigenous knowledge as described above are actions that destroy such systems of knowledge that may help restore our degraded ecosystems¹⁵ and our earth’s degraded lands, which is globally about 60% and 40% respectively. Much of the knowledge we seek in this domain is among the forest-based and other indigenous peoples who make up 6 % of the world’s population, but among whom are also about 1/5ths of world’s extremely poor people.¹⁶ The expansion of mining and other industries in forest regions, and the consequent displacement of indigenous peoples (along with their knowledge that is linked to their territories), is a major factor that contributes to the loss of these many strands of knowledge. As these ways of knowing are *living systems* that need to be practiced consistently and continuously, modern forms of their documentation, in whichever medium, is only a simulacrum of such knowledge.

A second threat to the conservation of such knowledge is less obvious, and more insidious. This is the glamorisation of matters indigenous, be it their food, medicine,¹⁷ clothing, music or dance, which are all in vogue in modern times. State policies as well as programmes developed by the corporate sector, which have both played an important role in the destruction of indigenous territories across the world, and played down their knowledge, are now the champions of indigenous peoples. Such a reversal of roles by powerful institutions and individuals has led to the dilution of the subject – and its present glamorisation – which prevents a full and deep engagement with the subject. This second threat that is pointed out is not to dissuade well-intended efforts but to be taken as a sign of caution: both governments and the private sector are now aware that there is much to be gained from the preservation of indigenous lands and their cultures, but their efforts remain superficial.

In conclusion, we could say that our strategy should be the rejuvenation and preservation of the *principles of conservation* as embodied in indigenous culture worldwide. This would entail the continuous effort to conserve whatever is left of our lands and ecosystems, despite much of it being defaced or bruised by human agency. A major part of such regions are, or have been, governed by indigenous peoples and project plans need to begin towards their restoration, which includes biological and cultural diversity, based on a fundamental respect for the earth that is not confined by time. Additionally, side-stepping glamorisation would mean getting to the heart of what the meanings of indigenous actions and symbols actually are – in all these dimensions – and what hidden meanings lie in their language and metaphors. These efforts are necessarily long and require much patience, but there can be no short cuts when we deal take up the task of restoring nature.

15 <https://www.theworldcounts.com/stories/impact-of-ecosystem-destruction>

16 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/indigenouspeoples>

17 About 40% of pharmaceutical products draw from nature and traditional knowledge (<https://www.who.int/newsroom/feature-stories/detail/traditional-medicine-has-a-long-history-of-contributing-to-conventional-medicine-andcontinues-to-hold-promise>)