

Invitation to support the

# School Of Nature

- Pritu Vatsa

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**I am Pritu**, a dreamer, free soul, and a co-learner in the school of life and a believer of co-creating holistic ideas and spaces. I am to be found mostly in and around forests, streams, mountains and villages, currently learning and sharing with the indigenous communities in Odisha and practising sustainability.

My journey started when I quit Masters which I was pursuing from JNU, Delhi after a year. The inner calling was to work on the grassroots. So I worked as a Gandhi Fellow and with a few organizations on the grassroots. I have been working in remote spaces across India, largely on education, since 2016. I have also been working in collaboration with Eco-Femme in parallel, trying to reach women and girls. With them, I design and facilitate workshops on eco-menstruation, talking around body discomfort, stigmas and taboos related to menstruation.

I have been in Odisha since almost the last 3 years. In the time I spent here, I worked with a couple of NGOs, which helped me gain a deeper understanding of this region. My love for Nature and quest to learn indigenouness keeps me here. And during the time I spent here, people in a few villages have come to know me reasonably well and I've also acquired decent verbal ability in Oriya and can communicate with villagers. And my ability to understand Kuvi, the language spoken in the village, is also improving.

During this course of co-learning and conversations in the villages, the idea of the 'School of Nature' evolved as an alternative to main-stream non-inclusive education. School of Nature is about developing culturally relevant, place-based content, and evolves with crisis-centric community education.

# School Of Nature

## Introduction

"We will know what type of education to provide, if we know what type of society we want." – John Dewey.

Indigenous communities all over the world are known for their harmonious and sustainable ways of living with animate and inanimate objects, both. One is aware how in history, and also at present, indigenous communities are looked upon as uncivilized and undeveloped. They are being exploited in the name of education, development, etc., to derive cheap labour, or extract resources from their land. They are displaced, suppressed and dissipated using several forces and allies.

Often in history, schools were used as a weapon for cultural genocide in various countries across the world. But all this is not just something from history. Rayagada district in Odisha is the habitat of Kondhs, the indigenous forest dwellers, culturally rich and abundant with values of sharing, caring and community-living and being ecologically conscious.

A large percentage of Kondh villages are now being affected by sponsored education that alienates them from their community. Ills of unsustainable development introduced in the form of TV, promotion of mono-cropping, hybrid seeds, pesticides, insecticides, and migration for quick cash, etc., are hampering their socio-cultural identity, and frugal and harmonious ways of living.

All of this is leading them to an individualistic life centred around money and market. It breaks their ecological connect, detribalises their thoughts and choices, and breaks the otherwise self-sustaining nature of the community. On top of that, we have the looming threat of global warming and climate change.

Still, more residential schools are being opened and being promoted at a larger pace, and day schools are being shut across several villages, thus continuing the history of cultural genocide. These schools with standard state curriculum are not contextual. Most of the teachers in these schools do not know the language of the children and are contemptuous of Adivasis and their culture.

“Nowhere is left,  
No roads undone,  
No huts of mud,  
No women smile,  
No rattling bamboos,  
And none making drums,  
No keepers of forest remain,  
And none which matters trail...”

Dongria Kondhs of Niyamgiri have shown massive resistance to the form of development which disharmonizes their culture and ecosystem. In the recent past, they have resisted mining companies who would vandalize their sacred mountains, roads that would cut through their divine forests, and schooling models which would take them away from their indigenous worldview. So have the Zapatistas in Mexico shown the world how Zapatas survive with the education that is contextually relevant, that takes native agriculture into account, and so on.

## Purpose

In relation to the above context, the 'School of Nature' envisages to integrate needful learning; one that takes into account the socio-cultural context of the region, and make learning relevant. The purpose is to retain a community which is healthy, happy, well informed, just, sustainable, caring and sharing, given the present day scenario of rat race and global warming. Also, we together aim to create, revive and strengthen a community which is self-sustainable, frugal, loving, ecologically conscious and considers themselves, the community, as a whole.

The idea is to not open another school but to establish an ambiguous school which has been functioning in the verandahs, on the corridors, under the shade of a tree, in the festivals, on the fields, in an empty room, by the river, and so on.



## Methodology

We grow with, by and for the community. And for the whole community, not just the children.

Values of ecological consciousness, caring-sharing, joy, creativity, justice and equity are focused upon.

Village elders are storehouses of indigenous knowledge and are the keepers of this society. They facilitate and guide the evolution of this co-learning space through their wisdom tales and conversations.

Subjects include the ability to read and speak in Kuvi (first language), followed by Oriya and other languages.

Use of head, heart and hands is the core principle.

Understanding the agro-ecology of the region will be an important subject.

Relevant arithmetic, science and geography will also to be taught.

Understanding of one's own socio-cultural, political is an important discussion.

Understanding indigenous worldview is an important subject for all.

Learning the songs which are sung at different times during festivals, agriculture etc, art, dance, myths is also equally important.

## Outcome

School of Nature will act as a catalyst in creating a society which is ecologically conscious, self-sustaining and rooted in values of caring and sharing, and help channelise a path of conscious progress. Indigenous children and adults can live by the values of indigenous worldview and sustainability, and with dignity. They will grow and live well informed and educated, non-dissipated from their native ecosystem.

“Asking we walk”, (a quote from Zapatas)

“And so, learning we grow together.”



Here are the details of a few Adivasi youth and women of the community, who are supporting and shaping the initiative.

**Padmabati Hikaka** has studied till 10th grade and she also believes that Kuvi language and the local history should be talked about, and children should know their first language first. She is quite creative in facilitating learning for children with locally available resources.

**Sabitri Hikaka** is a 23 year old Kondh who believes in their culture and connects with the streams and the forests. She knows about the local plants and herbs. She is helping us in designing and implementing contents.

**Majjhivani Hikaka** should be more than 50 years. She is a farmer of native seeds and knows of natives farming techniques. She is a guide and a teacher for us in understanding the Kuvi culture, language, festivals and plants.

**Dulal Deb** knows of plants, trees, agriculture, native seeds, etc. One may call him an informal botanist. He has also been a guide and a teacher.

**Sujit Sinha**, a retired professor from Azim Premji University and an educationist who has worked on the ground for various years has been mentoring through the process of designing and implementing School of Nature.

**Sharanya Nayak**, who has been living in an indigenous village and works on preserving native varieties of seeds, farms and also has a rich experience of working on contextual education and a fair understanding of Adivasi culture is helping.

And obviously, the elders in the community are major facilitators of the process.

## Support required

We need your help and support in pursuing this idea ahead. Following are the different ways you can contribute.

### Resource persons, skills, and material support

- Digital illustrators
- Video-photo editor
- Oriya-English-Oriya translators
- Architect trained in vernacular architecture
- Artists interested and experienced in doing wall paintings
- Botanist and zoologist to help formulate our bio-diversity documentation activities with children
- Volunteers interested in learning from the indigenous communities and has a prior experience of working with rural communities
- A handed-down bike and cycle
- A decently working laptop or tablet
- A hard disk to store images, videos and documented files
- Action/motion camera and a mic for documentation purpose

### Financial support

We are seeking financial support of Rs. 55, 000 per month. With this, we will be able to meet the basic stipend for three people working full time on the project, develop further content, meet travel expenses, gather resources and do the needful for the progression of 'School of Nature'.

Whatever big or small you contribute, it will be a massive help. Even the smallest contribution matters.  $100 \times 100 = 10000$  and so on.

**UPI for contribution - [prituvatsa12@okicici](mailto:prituvatsa12@okicici)**

## Stories from the Ground

Conversation on the rice field on the shift in agriculture and education and how it leads to cultural and identity shift.

Padma's field had rice plantation work going on. It takes a lot of endurance to sit in the same position and do the work. The rice is transplanted on fields a little far. The use of urea and other chemicals are recent in this village.



Aaya (mother) with an unlit native Kendu (modern people might call it tobacco) roll, says, “Once a man had less rice on the field. So he asked around and found this remedy. Probably he learned to use this from Bissamcuttack (nearby small town). And once he grew his rice with the urea in it, we all did. What one does, all do.”

“But what about that red worm which is the source of natural urea?” I ask. “It will die, right? The Kondhs believe in taking care of all; birds, worms, plants. And the soil is mother, right?”... Silence...



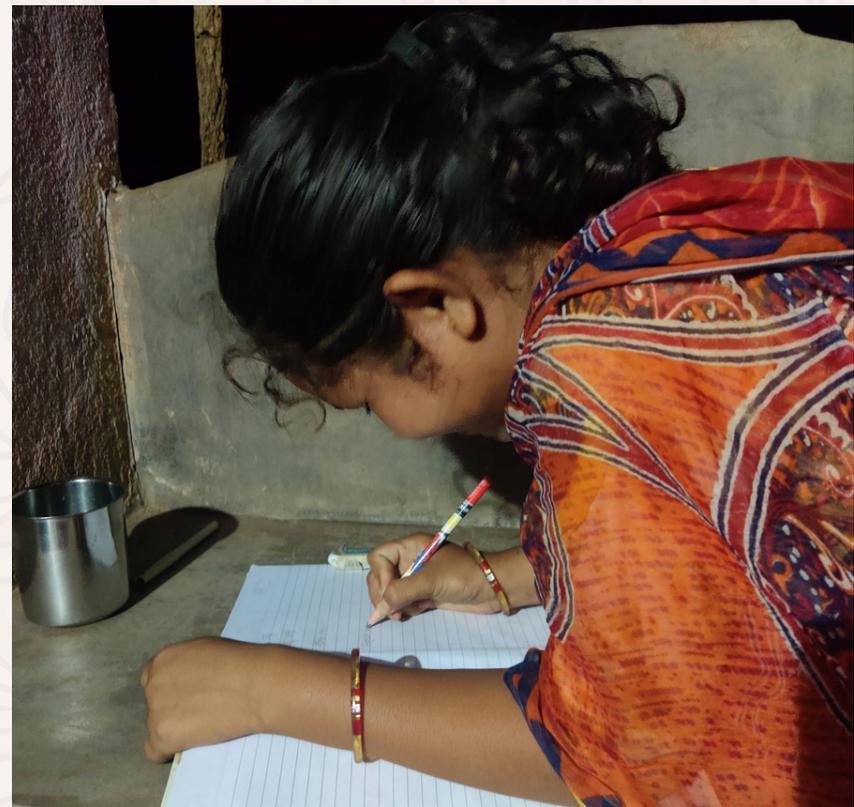
Reading and writing books in Kuvi (the first language).

Padma's grandmother agreed that these young children do not know Kuvi.

In an attempt to let the language stay kindled, we tried reading, writing and talking with children. Now that there is lockdown, we have more children. Children who go to residential schools often lose their grasp of the language.



Arti digging the root of a medicinal plant to prepare the bio-diversity register.



Shivani preparing the local bio-diversity register.

Initiating dialogues with the local healers and knowledgeable elders to enlist the herbs for creation of a local bio-diversity register as knowledge book for children.

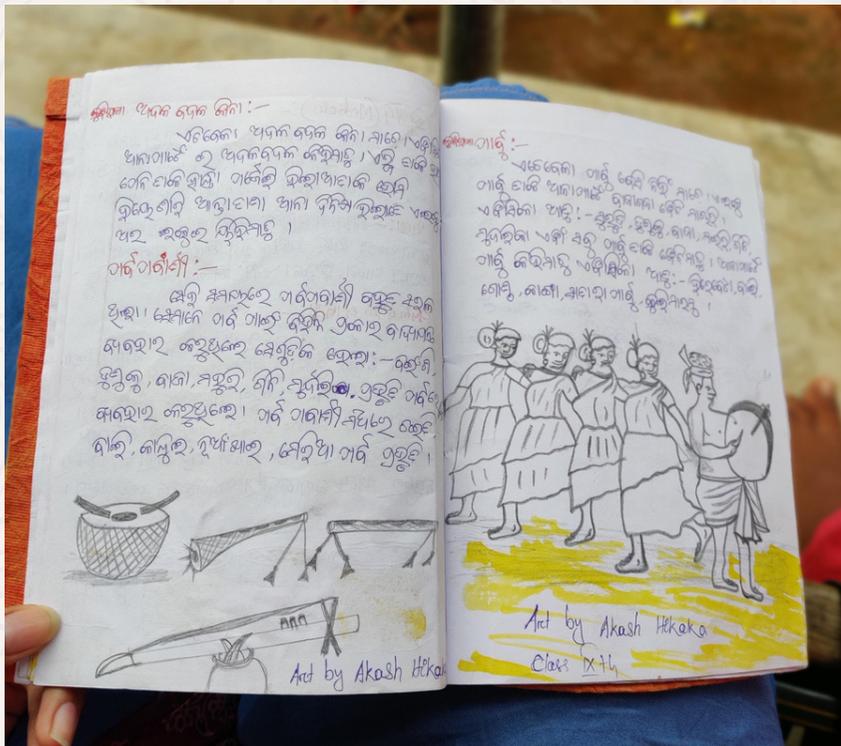
Visit to Sabilnar village.

Some 20 kms away from my house in a little earthen house, lived a healer. I went and met an old man from the Durra community to learn from him the language to understand the science of plants, trees, herbs and shrubs. We spoke a little about the timing to go to the forest and kinds of Vidya or knowledge.

Some 70 year old woman sat on a chair with its one leg broken and yet fixed by a wooden piece, represents the aspect of patience. Only women can serve the medicine, they say, and go to Forest early morning to pluck herbs as Forest has its own ways and norms.

Children will learn Science based on their context, and that shall help them be more prepared and resilient.





Local History of the village written and illustrated by the children



Learning with castor seeds



Aayas from different villages came to visit Padma's father as he was sick. I observed they chose to sit in the non-concrete part of the house. On asking they said it's better here.



A neighbour in the village was making a mud house alone, which is not so usual in a Kondh Village. In the village, people often come together to build houses for their fellow beings, the workload being shared by the men and women both. In exchange, the owner of the house offers food and alcohol to them in the end, thus celebrating the construction of the house.

We were returning after eating maize from the fields and saw Nani (sister) building the house alone. I asked the children if we can go see, and help. While I was learning to plaster with mud, Aaya (mother from the house I go and live in) came and saw what we were doing, and she corrected us by sharing an old technique of using a certain kind of stone to smoothly push in the mud between the stones. This technique was alien to Nani because of the generation gap and work not being shared in the present day.

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To volunteer, gift your skills, and to support, contact:

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