From: Santhi Sarma <santhibelhaven@yahoo.co.in>
Sent: Thursday, 15 May 2025 7:55 PM

Here is the first report on the initiation of my work with the expected help from RIC. I was in Wayanad for eight days and was able to meet the youngsters who are engaged in conservation education and action, mainly among tribal children, with a lot of settler children and youngsters also participating. The unity and harmony among the third generation of tribal as well as settler youngsters are truly redeeming to me. This is the path to peace, harmony, plurality and justice, all humans have to take if we want peace and happiness in the world across artificial borders and walls in between nations and cities, villages and farmlands.

Here is a video of the two day art and nature education camp among children which Akhila, the young girl (whom I will support) took on her mobile phone camera.

With much love and deep gratitude,

Santhi

First Report to the Rainforest Information Centre May, 2025

I was in Wayanad from the 22nd to 29th April, 2025 to initiate my work on **Nature Education for Children along with the Gothradeepam (Tribal Lamp) Children's Library. I was also able to take a few interviews with tribal elders and youngsters to document the oral history of traditional knowledge, folklore, customary laws and rituals to maintain social, ecological and generational justice and harmony.**

I was fortunate to combine my initiative with a unique program taking place there called **'Ottamuri Veedu' – Single Room House – Where Herbs and Wounds Heal Each Other. This is organized by the children's library and a few committed artists.**



Single Room House



Installation with forest material

Essentially this venture is what the artists call a Cross Disciplinary Art Project combining ancient wisdom of tribal people, their most austere life in their one room hut which houses their meager possessions, their seeds, agricultural tools, their Goddesses and Gods, their hopes, despair and faith in living in harmony with all beings and the Mother Earth.

I had been in touch with this group and the mutual respect and trust we have developed over the years, and some divine conspiracy made my nature education camp and their tribal art camp merge and become one. Tribal children are brilliant and imaginative and their artistic and musical/dance capabilities show that they still know the Art of Life/Living.

The installation they made on an old discarded hemp mat with dry leaves and flowers, fallen branches of plants, feathers of birds and butterfly wings was innovative and beautiful, and full of meaning and metaphor.

The walls of an old unoccupied house destroyed by floods were made alive with charcoal drawings of exquisite beauty and ethnic artistic talent.



Wall Art



Gathering material from the forest and fixing them on an old hemp carpet

I was able to interact with the educated young girls who are keen to become nature educators, seed keepers, earth healers and restorers of traditional farming and ecosystems. I am attaching a video taken by Akhila whom I am going to support with money as well as study materials. They are a wonderful team of three elder girls who are mentoring three more Adivasi girls who have completed school education and plan to go for higher studies.

I spent two days with them sharing stories and songs, information and knowledge on basic ecological principles, nature conservation philosophy and deep ecology. I am overwhelmed by the way they welcomed me to their midst and smothered me with their love, joy, trust and enthusiasm.



The elder girls already are initiated by my friends and so it was not a big challenge for me to guide them to the next level of combining scientific knowledge with ancient wisdom of biology, ecology, geography, wildlife

conservation, natural ways of farming, food and nutrition security and sovereignty and living in harmony and joy with the living world of Nature.



Young Team of Nature Educators whom I shall support with the help from RIC

Our forest and riverside walks were enjoyable, educative, enriching and enlightening. I am amazed by their deep understanding of ecological ethics and commitment to the cause of nature and wildlife conservation. I need to give them only the scientific foundations, clarification on a few critical questions they face from the public, parents, farmers and a few teachers.







Oral Testimonies

Oral testimonies were collected from a few Adivasi Elders (Shamans, Medicine Women and Men), Traditional Farmers with deep agricultural and ecological wisdom and Law Keepers who hold regular gatherings to solve (dissolve) issues and problems and bring peace and justice. I am slowly transcribing the amazing revelations and learnings I got from them.





I met a few youngsters, both women and men who are able to have a comfortable mix of the old ways and new modern conveniences. One of them is an educated youngster who has taken to traditional farming in a leased land inside dense forests. According to him this way of living has no gains, but only peace of mind, which he chose very early in life. A mother daughter team of Adiya tribal women are on their own documenting the traditional knowledge, peace and justice keeping protocols, customary laws regarding marriage, divorce, releasing the soul of the diseased, releasing the widow from confinement, custodianship of children, farming and fishing, hunting and foraging.


Young farmer


Mother-Daughter team


With the Story Teller

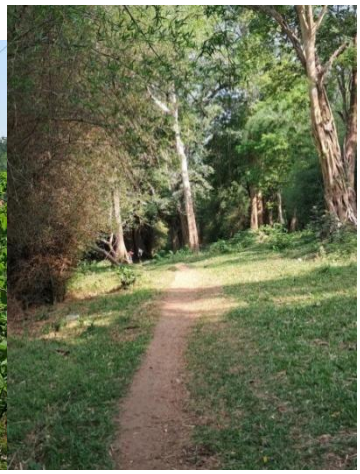
I also met a grand old woman who is a storehouse of old folktales, folklore, traditional sayings and songs and humorous and sad anecdotes from her childhood which are true testimonies of the ecological and social changes the land the tribal people have gone through in the last 70 years.

Ecological Change and Social Change in the Tribal Landscape

But the landuse patterns are being transformed drastically, the forests being cleared, wild rivers being dammed, paddy lands reclaimed for urbanisation, sacred groves and pagan Goddesses and Gods becoming modern temples of institutionalized religion and so on. The social change happening in the once harmonious tribal communities is in many ways disastrous and these vulnerable people need help to get back their self confidence and will to survive.

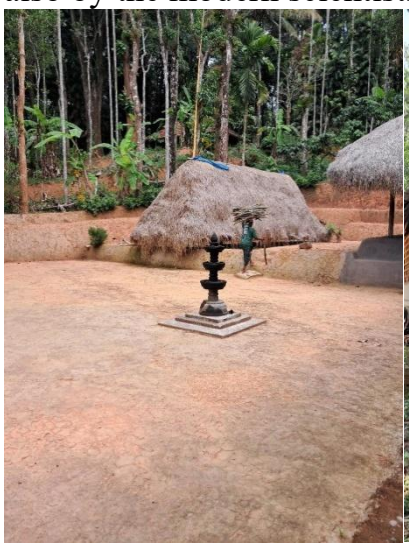
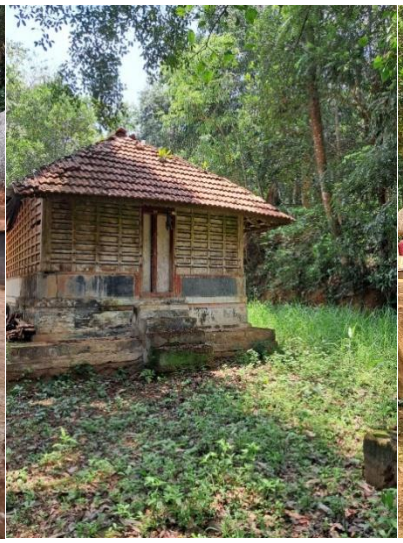
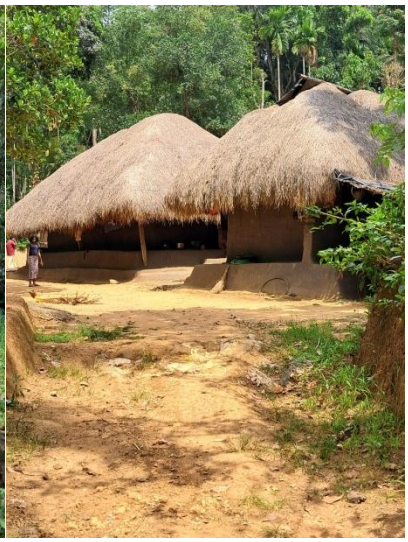






What is left of the old ways, the old mud houses thatched with straw or grass, the sacred groves and the vast paddy fields need to be conserved for the posterity, not as museum pieces or tourism destinations but as living, thriving

and growing ways of healing, loving and nourishing the land and future generations.
We as a species are not yet sure about where we went wrong and which path we should take to regain sanity and peace. Yet we cannot give up hope in our capacity to adapt, transform ourselves and take intelligent decisions. At least here the ancient ways which still remain and are followed by a few have a lot to teach and guide us. I feel it is time for us to recognise and honour some of the deepest teachings that have come from well reflected times and its generations of sages. We humans have the capacity to recognise, repent, correct and embrace the wild and natural ways of Gaia. It is here that tribal people can become our teachers and guides. A synthesis of ancient wisdom and scientific principles seems to be evolving in many parts of the world. Principles of reciprocity, symbiotic relationships and the incredible capacity of Gaia to regain her balance and correct the thermostat of life are being understood now not only by the deep ecologists but also by the modern scientists.

We really have reached the point where two roads are diverging in a yellow wood as Robert Frost said in his poem, ‘The Road Not Taken’. We cannot travel both and get the benefits of both the worlds, the urban and the wild. Will we take the less trodden wild path to peace and harmony? Or will we prefer the path of material development, unlimited growth, greed and dissatisfaction?

Change is of course inevitable, but how it happens and whether it will give the ecosystems, wildlife and the vulnerable human communities enough time to adapt, restore and cope with the consequences is the question that should be addressed by the change-makers and the concerned citizens. Will it happen with consent, dignity and understanding? Or will it be done with force, destruction and loss? That choice will define us as a society. If we do not ask the right questions about development at what cost, and who pays the price, we will certainly forget who loses. The harmonious world of the indigenous people and their wild and lived in habitats is not just theirs – it is part of our shared human story. Ignoring that doesn’t just harm them – it lessens us all and makes our life



also poor, unfair, unhealthy and joyless.

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From: Santhi Sarma <santhibelhaven@yahoo.co.in>
Sent: Saturday, 7 June 2025 10:47 AM

Dear John & friends,

I have been doing pure nature / deep ecology programs in schools and colleges and also among tribal (forest tribal communities included) mostly voluntarily and often with support from RIC and John Seed.

The attached picture is that of seed balls of seeds of indigenous forest trees made by a upper primary children in a school in Wayanad.
This is part of the ecological restoration program I have initiated. This was done as part of World Environment Day celebration. I feel that suddenly there is a keen and sincere interest and concern about environmental matters in the minds of many and all children too. Can we hope that tides are turning?

I have also been involved in forest conservation, ecological restoration, traditional agricultural rejuvenation and conservation of seeds of indigenous cultivar and land race varieties. Part of this initiative is done through a central government project on comprehensive tribal development for food and nutritional security and livelihood and economic security.

Right now I have initiated a support program for nature and basic ecology education based at Wayanad, a hilly region in the Western Ghats where forests and human communities are able to survive in near harmony (at least till recently).

But things are changing rapidly because of ingress of settlers usurping tribal lands, encroaching forest lands, aggressive tourism development in ecologically fragile and socio - culturally vulnerable tribal landscapes. People are strongly

divided on basic ecological issues, wildlife - human conflicts are increasing but a strong movement for wildlife - forest - traditional nature-friendly livelihood conservation is also emerging, mainly among youth, Adivasis (tribal communities) and certain traditional farmers. I would like to bring a strong component on deep ecology and nature conservation beyond human concerns into this movement. I want to stress the pure joy and health, the art and beauty of life which can be had only in wild, free, intact and healthy natural ecosystems and human societies living in harmony. I want to emphasize that if only a generation of humans grow up who value and respect natural and ecological ethics, laws and principles, can there be just, joyful, healthy and harmonious human survival.

I want to support a few Adivasi women's groups in another part of the Western Ghats, Attappady adjacent to Silent Valley National Park (a unique river valley rainforest which John Seed had supported in saving from a mega hydro-electric project in the 1980s).

A gentle reminder and request to let me know if and when the support will be received by me. I can plan my work for the next months accordingly. **Sorry to hurry you. Just a word of confirmation is enough.**

Hope this finds you and your dear ones well and happy.

Love and gratitude,
Santhi