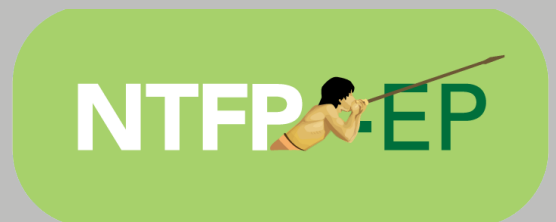


SEPTEMBER 2021

Leaf Litter

AUTUMN EQUINOX ISSUE



INDIA

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On hasty decisions

The Union Cabinet with its Chairman, PM Narendra Modi, have made some big decisions. More than Rs 11,000 crores has been allocated for palm oil with an aim to save on our foreign exchange. We are the world's largest importer of palm oil, and our vulnerability due to this dependence on other countries, especially Malaysia, is high. Much of international politics is about what we need from other countries, especially if it is oil, arms, nuclear reactors, or food.

Palm oil plantations have been on India's agenda for long, with some 14 states targetted and 1.64 under palm oil at present, with more to come. This time round the bio-diverse regions of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the north eastern states have been chosen to save India it's foreign exchange and make us atmanirbhar. It is apparent that these regions were brought in due to their fairly high rainfall, of near 3000 mm annually, a pre-requisite for palm oil. Depending solely on ground water, something we have done in many states, has been disastrous. However, water alone is not enough to guarantee success in this venture.

Almost 95 % of palm oil, especially in Southeast Asia, is planted in acidic and low fertility soils. To rectify these non-suitable conditions the inputs and investments are very high, in terms of money, time and chemicals, not to mention the detrimental effects on the soil in case of soil erosion and run-off; the latter is high when slopes are higher than 15 degrees, as in parts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In addition, the texture, depth and structure of soil will be crucial in determining the potential of yields from plantations. In the islands the soils are nutritionally poor with declining organic matter, both factors that will require high costs to be corrected. Much of the inland areas have highly alkaline soils which, though beneficial in small amounts, may cause salt deposits to form at the roots of the plants and prevent them from absorbing other nutrients for their optimum growth. The coastal areas are prone to tidal floods with acidic soils. All these characteristics that influence palm oil need to be factored in before establishing plantations in these fragile islands.

One hopes that the decision to become atmanirbhar with palm oil is not a hasty one, as some of the past decisions in recent years have been. We have seen what demonitization did to the country and its economy – without bringing the black money back, and without the promised Rs 15 lakhs in our bank accounts. More recently, during the first wave of covid-19, a thoughtless and unconsidered decision by our leader(s) made us witness the long and painful walk of our marginalized peoples from the cities back to their homes. The Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education and Research has expressed its concern of palm oil plantations in the Andamans and sounded a warning, as have other experts in this field.

It is never too late to reconsider, rethink and re-navigate a decision. It is integral to atmanirbharta.

Madhu Ramnath
September, 2021

Indigenous activist Lukas Avendaño fights the narco-machine in Mexico¹

Antonio Prieto Stambaugh



This article addresses the recent struggle undertaken by indigenous artist Lukas Avendaño in the search for his brother Bruno Alonso, who vanished on May 10, 2018, joining more than 70,000 people who have been victims of kidnapping and forced "disappearance" in Mexico. Since then, Avendaño has used his skills as a *muxe* (or "two-spirit") performance artist to raise awareness of this plight and literally hold hands with those who wish to silently join him in a refusal to accept disappearance.

Avendaño's work is part of the ongoing drama faced by thousands of families in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, where artists and activists (or *artivists*) have been addressing the crisis of murdered or disappeared people since the dirty wars of the Cold War era. What is notable about Avendaño's performance is the way he "queers" the repertoire of activist demonstrations to demand justice for the families of the disappeared. He and his colleagues have been building alliances with diverse grassroots organizations demanding an end to gender violence and the impunity of organized crime.

Lukas Avendaño in the performance *Réquiem para un alcaraván*, Xalapa, Veracruz, México, 2012.
Photo courtesy of Antonio Prieto.

Avendaño was born in 1977 into the Zapotec community of Oaxaca, Mexico, and has recently gained international recognition for performances that address issues of queerness, class, and ethnicity. Muxes are often referred to as the “indigenous third sex,” but Avendaño is quick to point out that they have a much more complex subject position: “The muxe only exists within a collective, cultural ecosystem that embraces femininity and masculinity in a series of interrelated practices” (Avendaño 2020b). The artist prefers to speak about *muxeidad* (*muxeity*) as a way of carrying oneself in relation to the community, gracefully participating in social and ritual life. The muxe notion of grace is expressed as *guenda*, a Zapotec concept that alludes not only to a personal esthesis of everyday life but also to specific commitments with the larger social body (Avendaño 2019).



Buscando a Bruno performed outside the Mexican Consulate of Barcelona, Spain in June of 2018. Lukas Avendaño holds hands with a local artist from the Xica Teatre group. Photo still from the short documentary *Buscando a Bruno*, posted on YouTube. Used with permission of Lukas Avendaño.

In 2018, Avendaño's community was shattered by the forceful disappearance of his brother Bruno Alonso, who was visiting his hometown in Tehuantepec and scheduled to attend a Mother's Day gathering on the evening of May 10. Bruno never showed up, and for over two years, his family experienced the nightmare that thousands of people in Mexico who search for their loved ones experience as they carry out actions to demand justice. Bruno's body was finally found in a clandestine grave, and returned to his family in November of 2020.

Lukas's² struggle to trace the whereabouts of his brother was carried out in public performances called *Buscando a Bruno* (Searching for Bruno) and *Llamado a la autoridad* (A call to the authorities), which were presented before government buildings and museums in Mexico and abroad. In a recent interview (Avendaño 2020a), Lukas explained to me that he considers his performances a means of slowly advancing on the road toward justice. But whatever is achieved on that terrain necessarily calls for at least two other fronts of action: legal battle and media attention. Thus, visibility is only a means to an end: to find Bruno and demand that the government makes effective its mandate to end large-scale criminal impunity.

Lukas's work is not only changing the ways muxe and other indigenous people are perceived in mainstream Mexico (as ignorant, exotic objects of contemplation). I argue he is also gesturing toward a queer utopia where political, aesthetic, and sexual dissidence merge, where violence and impunity fail to destroy hope.

What kind of disappearance does Lukas perform? His public interventions draw from an existing repertoire of political activism in Latin America since the Cold War, which demands governments investigate forced disappearances and make accountable those who have perpetrated these crimes. Lukas's

activism stands out for its aesthetics, which draws from queer and muxe sensibilities. Like many others in recent years, Lukas appropriates performative tactics used by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (mothers of the disappeared) in Argentina and also in Mexico, where the Eureka Committee, headed by Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, has been fighting for the rights of political prisoners and the disappeared. Both groups have staged public protests since the late 1970s, during the so-called dirty wars waged against political dissidents by repressive regimes. They share similar forms of marching in public plazas or in front of government offices carrying pictures of their disappeared children, siblings, or partners.

Lukas's performance displays a defiant *trans* corporality, both feminine and masculine, which goes against the grain of the homophobic public sphere in Mexico. The artist, who is a university-trained anthropologist, also deliberately deploys ethnicity, dressing in Tehuana attire as a way to, in his own words, "accentuate my origins in the Tehuantepec Isthmus of Oaxaca, and accentuate my particular *muxeidad*" (Avendaño 2018).

More than a month after his brother's disappearance, Lukas flew to Barcelona, Spain, where he had been invited to perform by a local group of activists. When they learned about his plight, they offered support to stage a protest outside the city's Mexican Consulate. Lukas's decision to use the Tehuana attire came naturally, as he had traveled with the wardrobe used in his stage work. Moreover, he knew that dressing in indigenous clothing would attract the attention of media and, more importantly, of the consulate employees, tasked with assisting Mexicans living in the city.

During the performance itself, Lukas invited his local friends to take turns sitting next to him and holding hands, creating a tableau vivant reminiscent of Frida Kahlo's



Lukas Avendaño at the entrance to the Fiscalía General de la República (National Prosecutor's Office) building in Mexico City, during the "Llamado a la autoridad" demonstration, May 2019. Photo still from the short video *Niño cigarra* (Cicada child), by Miguel Crespo, available on Vimeo. Used with permission of Lukas Avendaño.

emblematic double self-portrait *Las dos Fridas* (1939). The Barcelona performance achieved its desired effect: an employee from the consulate came out to ask if they could be of assistance. Lukas was prepared and said he had a letter to deliver to the Mexican consul regarding his brother's disappearance. He was invited onto the building's grounds, where he met with the Vice-Consul, who promised to notify Mexican authorities. The next day, the Ministry of Foreign Relations in Mexico sent a cable to Oaxaca's public prosecutor's office (*fiscalía*), instructing the office to look into the case. However, the investigation was stalled for more than a year, during which Lukas's family received an insulting letter from Mexico City's naval headquarters informing them that Bruno had been fired because of his failure to show up to work for three consecutive days. Not only was the navy doing nothing to help find an employee who had been reported missing months earlier, but with that letter they were also denying any kind of compensation to the family.

It is a testimony to Lukas's steadfastness and courage that, in spite of the blatant mis-

treatment received by government offices supposedly in charge of procuring justice, he continues to carry on with such grace. As he frequently points out, his is but one of thousands of stories shared by families in Mexico.

Bruno's disappearance occurred in the context of what is often referred to as a "spiral of violence" that began in 2006 when former President Felipe Calderón declared war on drug trafficking. Since then, more than 70,000 people have been forcibly disappeared, according to a recent report by Mexico's Secretariat of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación) (*La Jornada* 2020)³. This staggering number does not include the nearly 300,000 homicides—mostly femicides—registered as of that year (*El Universal* 2020). This scenario of cruelty, death, and fear, found to a greater or lesser degree in many countries around the world, continues to thrive unabated, leading analysts to conclude it has become deeply ingrained in the modus operandi of governments and private corporations. Mexican theorist Sayak Valencia calls this "gore capitalism" 2010.

Lukas's struggle to demand justice regarding his brother Bruno—as in the case of the families of the forty-three students who disappeared in the state of Guerrero in September 2014—lends a human dimension to the unfathomable numbers cited above. Most of the lives lost are of people who already suffered economic, sexual, or ethnic marginalization, people who were exploited and then disposed of by the “narco-machine.”⁴

Lukas's family doesn't know the reason Bruno was targeted. Even though the navy employed him, his job description only involved office work in Mexico City. But there are reasons to believe he could have been a victim of the narco-machine in Oaxaca, a state that has geopolitical importance as part of the Trans-Isthmus Corridor, a long-planned alternative to the Panama Canal.

As part of his struggle to demand justice for Bruno, Lukas has deployed public interventions called *Llamado a la autoridad* (A call to the authorities), in which he is joined by a group of anonymous activists to stage demonstrations in front of government buildings. Lukas calls these an “act of desperation,” after continued meetings with prosecutors in Oaxaca and Mexico City failed to yield results regarding his brother's whereabouts. In early 2019, Lukas staged a protest outside the Fiscalía General de la República (FGR, or the National Prosecutor's Office) on Insurgentes Avenue, Mexico City. To that end, he contacted a group of activists to help him with the symbolic occupation of the offices at 7:00 a.m., when employees would be arriving to work. This public version of *Llamado a la autoridad* began with Lukas and thirty people showing up in front of the modern, glass-covered FGR building. They were all dressed in white coveralls, similar to the uniforms used during forensic investigations in mass graves around Mexico⁵. On the backs of the overalls was printed the phrase: “¿A dónde van los desaparecidos? Seguimos buscando a Bruno” (Where do the

disappeared go? We keep on looking for Bruno). Lukas recounts how guards came out of the building to nervously survey the proceedings, calling employees to quickly go up to their offices, perhaps concerned that the group was planning to set off explosives. Lukas then read out loud a poem to his brother, each verse repeated in chorus by the group:

May is the summer
May is the day of the everlasting Sandunga
May is when the earth's craters exhale their breath . . .
It was May, cicada child, winging of cicada,
flamboyant child . . .
It was May when they took you away, Bruno;
But I know that when you finally emerge,
you will be a beautiful *Cicada orni*,
Because that is your *tona*, your *nagual*, your
avatar.
That is why May is not the month of the disappeared,
It is instead the month of the immortalized,
the everlasting.
May 10, forty degrees Celsius in the shade,
May 10, the day they took you away, Bruno.
We carry on with our search for Bruno!⁶

As had happened with the performance at the Mexican Consulate of Barcelona the year before, this action drew the attention of the authorities, and Lukas was asked to enter the building to state his demand. He was able to deliver a letter denouncing the fact that the previous prosecutor had “lost” papers pertaining to Bruno's case, which resulted in further delays to the investigation. “After that demonstration of force,” Lukas told me, “I was able to meet with the national prosecutor, who ordered the creation of dialogue meetings [*mesas de trabajo*] to look into the case. As of that day, things are finally advancing, albeit at a snail's pace, but I'm accusing previous officials of deliberately delaying the investigation and thus acquiescing to Bruno's disappearance” (Avendaño 2020b).

Lukas also points out how justice in Mexico is made inaccessible to the poor, via the high costs involved in everything from taking buses to the cities where you need to file demands to the prohibitive fees involved in hiring lawyers. "Bear in mind," Lukas told me, "that farmworkers in rural Oaxaca barely earn two hundred pesos [less than ten US dollars] a day!" Add to that the lack of knowledge of citizens' rights and legal terminology, the Kafkaesque bureaucratic labyrinth awaiting those who attempt to file demands, plus the constant fear of suffering harm from criminals who would block any investigation into their dealings. It is for this reason that families of the disappeared have formed hundreds of independent groups; they are working-class people (mostly housewives) who, regrettably, need to become experts in forensic excavations. These people, at times aided by nonprofit organizations, use the kind of protective uniform donned by the activists of *Llamado a la autoridad*.

Epilogue

On December 3, 2020, news broke that justice authorities had found Bruno's body in a "clandestine" common grave close to the town of Salina Cruz in the Tehuantepec region of Oaxaca (Manzo 2020). The report states that the Avendaño family received Bruno's remains at his mother's home for proper burial, a painful event that nonetheless was "good news" after 30 months of searching. A few days later, Lukas posted a video on Facebook where he thanks all involved in making the return possible, but affirms that his activism will continue, centered on bringing justice to the forced disappearance and murder of his brother. He also denounces local officials who deceived his family by falsely claiming they had seen Bruno at a party a few days after his disappearance. I asked Lukas what comes next, to which he replied that he and his family will keep demanding truth, justice, accountability, reparations, and the assurance that

crimes of this kind will not go unpunished. Bruno Avendaño can finally be mourned, but Lukas will continue to work with activists and families to denounce crimes against humanity in Mexico and elsewhere in the Americas.

Footnotes:

¹This is part of a longer text published as a book chapter in *Performances that Change the Americas*, edited by Stuart A. Day (Routledge, 2021).

²I'll use the artist's given name to avoid confusing him with his brother Bruno.

³Up to 2019, official estimates mentioned around 40,000 disappeared, so it was surprising that the number almost doubled after the current administration's report.

⁴Narco-machine is a term coined by the Mexican sociologist Rossana Reguillo (2010).

⁵*Llamado a la autoridad* can be seen online in a short video produced as an addendum to the documentary *La utopía de la mariposa*: <https://vimeo.com/337897667>.

⁶Translation from Spanish by Antonio Prieto.

Antonio Prieto is Professor at the Theatre Department of the Veracruzana University, in Mexico. There, he chairs the Graduate Program in Performing Arts, and directs the peer-reviewed journal *Investigación Teatral* (<https://investigacionteatral.uv.mx>).

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Establishing healthy food systems

Pandurang Hegde

One of the main targets of the Sustainable Development Goals was to achieve zero hunger by 2030. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has released the "State of the Food Security and Nutrition in the World" (SoFI) report for 2020. It categorically states that the world is not in a position to meet this target.

The prolonged pandemic raging in different parts of the world has had a negative impact on the supply of healthy food. The numbers of hungry people has risen from 83 to 132 million, adding to the total number of malnourished people in the world. The existence and increasing burden of malnutrition, in its many forms, remains a challenge. Ironically, the report also states that adult obesity is on the rise in all regions.

These trends call for adopting healthy food systems that can provide food security, not just the calories through starchy staples like rice and wheat, but nutritious food to maintain good health.

The FAO and WHO recommend a daily consumption of a minimum of 400 gram per person per day of fruits and vegetables. However, these are five times more expensive than the diets that meet the energy needs. Only rich and upper middle income groups can afford these healthy diets. With loss of livelihood opportunities due to the pandemic, more than 3 billion people cannot afford healthy diets. The FAO estimates that in the global South at least 57 % of the population is not in a position to afford a healthy diet.

India boasts of a tropical climate with a favourable environment for fruit and vegetable, and we produce a surplus of cereals. We are the largest producers of milk in the world and our traditional diets are hailed as

one of the healthiest. Despite this we are the diabetic capital of the world, with 73 million people suffering from the disease; we also have the highest number of obese people and the highest number of malnourished children in the world.

The reasons are well known as we consume low quality carbohydrates sourced from white rice, sugar and bread loaded with starch. Indians consume an average of 15 spoons of sugar daily; the WHO recommends 5 spoons a day! Vegetable oils used in Indian cooking, sunflower, palm oil, and canola and soybean oil becomes toxic when heated, these are not healthy. About 84 % of the people in India are protein deficient, according to Indian Dietetic Association.

The National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16) reveals that about 54 % of women do not consume fruits, eggs or dark leafy vegetables on a daily basis. There is a hidden gender bias among the Indian population, in which women are not able to eat healthy food due to cultural prejudices. Thus we face the double burden of an inefficient diet with additional dose of cultural taboo that leads to anaemic conditions among women and children.

A study conducted around Pune, showed that both children and adults were snacking more frequently, on cheap snacks with high sugar, salt and low quality fat. It concluded that "unhealthy and cheap snack foods are crowding out healthier foods, including pulses, coarse grains and vegetables. More than 50 percent of the adults in urban areas, and 29 per cent of women were obese in rural areas leading to an obesity epidemic". The report calls for addressing the food system of socially disadvantaged groups like women and disempowered groups. Our policy makers target these groups through the PDS, but the need of the hour is to change the consumers behaviour from highly processed foods that have a negative impact on their health.

India is already into the second year of the pandemic, but there is no sign from the government or policy makers to evolve a practical strategy towards a healthy food system, as part of economic resilience in a post covid scenario. One could use the existing model of NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), and widen the scope to support people with rightful employment to produce food and vegetables. As these are short duration crops, it can enhance nutritional security in the times of economic slowdown caused by such pandemics. This could be a road map for greening the economy with minimal capital and maximum ripple effect, and for providing meaningful employment. Establishing healthy food system is the best way to boost the immunity of common people.

It is high time that this initiative be launched by state governments and supported by the central government as a step towards food and nutritional security.

Pandurang Hegde is an activist based in Sirsi, Karnataka, and the founder of the Appiko movement.

On the vitality of indigenous languages

Madhu Ramnath

Language: The music with which we charm the serpents guarding another's treasure.

– *The Devil's Enlarged Dictionary*

THIS paper attempts to understand the status and probable future trends of indigenous languages in India. It is based on the author's knowledge of some of the tribal languages spoken in Bastar district, in eastern central India – Halbi, Durwa, Gondi and Bhatari – as well as regular communication through WhatsApp with two indigenous youth groups. Both these groups have members of the Durwa community. However, one is a village-level group of about 30 people, communicating in Durwa (mainly) and using the Devnagiri or Roman scripts. The other is a district-level group of about 300 people, using the Devnagiri script and communicating *only* in Bastariya Hindi, a speciation of Hindi that combines Halbi, Odia and Hindi. I have also consulted with one of the leaders of the Halba Samaj, especially on the matter of effect of the dominant languages (Hindi and Chhattisgarhi) on Halbi. Some preliminary research work on the ecology of language has also been an aid to developing this paper.

Earlier authors¹ have developed, and extended, the biological concept that accounts for the vitality of species and organisms in their natural environments to explain how languages fare in social environments.² Languages too have lives, and go through the processes of birth, have vitality (or weakness) if they are maintained well, are endangered, and die, if there are ultimately no speakers. In this sense languages can be conceived as species whose fate depends on the interactions of the speakers.

Mufwene mentions that vitality of language depends on how regularly speakers use it in the various settings;³ that is, whether a speaker is able to use the language in all the areas of knowledge and experience, in only some of these domains, or in none of them. In monolingual settings this is not an issue but when there is more than one language spoken in an area this implies population contact and language coexistence and, usually, language competition. This competition is then resolved when the speakers select a language.

A central concern will therefore be whether policy and legislation about the inclusion of a language in a school or state will suffice to retain or improve its vitality. Conversely, we will also be able to understand whether the non-inclusion of a language in official capacities necessarily weakens it or causes it to be less spoken.

The village-level WhatsApp group mentioned above are of Durwa-speaking adivasi youth from a specific village in Bastar. Durwa is an agglutinative language and spoken with different accents; even within as small an area as central-eastern Bastar, and the contiguous western part of Malkangiri district, there are about five distinct accents, each distinct enough to place the location of the speaker. The language has no script and our messages are conveyed in the Devnagiri and Roman scripts. Neither of these scripts have notations and symbols that do justice to Durwa phonetics, and words like *venjñen* (I came, tend to get rounded off to *venyen*, and *chokkom*, lots or many, are now displaced by 'khoob' from the Halbi). There are several other words that have a *jñ* in their construction and it is probable that the written word, the script, freezes the fluidity of sound, making other pronunciations of such words a 'deviation.'

The first WhatsApp group members speak Durwa, and many of them are bilingual in Halbi,⁴ as some of the families migrated here from Halbi-speaking regions. Some of these families speak Halbi at home and Durwa within the community. The postings in this group are about village affairs, births and deaths, marriages and festivals, sometimes with small video-clips about a dance or a ritual. Some people also post information about seasonal phenomena, like the flowering of a species. There are also invitations for fishing expeditions, or a call to come and share some palm toddy. The variety of knowledge domains discussed is wide and vibrant, and is a reflection of the community's near total engagement with various aspects of their social and natural environment. Despite biligualism in Halbi – which serves to bridge socio-economic and inter-group gaps – there is no linguistic or cultural dislocation.

Despite the positive description of the WhatsApp group mentioned above the vitality of the Durwa language, in the larger context of the district, is waning. Most villages have schools where the medium of instruction is Hindi; in addition, the lingua franca of central Bastar, especially in the weekly markets, as well as communication with people from other indigenous communities, is conducted in Halbi. It is not that Halbi or Hindi threaten Durwa (or Gondi); but these former languages provide the speakers with a socio-economic advantage and provide an impetus in being bilingual in them. The reason a language is chosen is seldom linguistic but social and economic, or if it obtains a political gain. A certain level of 'higher' status in speaking Hindi over Halbi cannot be ignored.

In addition, the advent of modern education has left the young tribal people with less opportunity of using their language in all the domains of knowledge and experience usually attributed to their way of

life. This includes food collection from the forest, festivals and celebrations (during which time they may be in school), and a spiritual engagement with their environment. The younger generation in tribal communities have little knowledge of the names of forest plants and of the fish in the surrounding streams – and associated words used in collecting, processing or using them – as these domains of experience are no longer visited. Over time the modern youth's vocabulary is reduced to the home and related domains with many loan-words from the dominant Hindi and Halbi languages they are in contact with.

A comparable situation is encountered when one examines the vitality of Halbi, spoken in Chhattisgarh,⁵ Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha. The Halba people in Chhattisgarh occupy the higher rungs of the socio-economic ladder and are bilingual in Hindi (and in Chhattisgarhi in northern Chhattisgarh). Though there is a successful move within the Halba Samaj (Halba Society) to make Halbi the official language in their meetings in south Chhattisgarh, this has not worked in the north. In the north the Samaj has let go of their language as an intrinsic part of their ethnic identity. Among the educated Halba youth – many of whom hold government positions – the mother tongue has given way to Hindi, which is also the state language as well as being one of the important Scheduled languages of the country and provides obvious advantages to its speakers.

The situation with Gondi, a Dravidian language, is different with 3.2 million speakers and the peoples, also known as Koiturs, spread across several states. The Koiturs live in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha. As the state boundaries were redrawn along linguistic boundaries in 1956 (States Reorganization Act) the Koiturs became minorities in the states they inhabited. The state languages

were the medium of instruction in schools. All these (state) languages except Telugu belong to the Indo-Aryan family and could have made it difficult for the Koiturs to learn them and navigate their way through society. Despite their wish Gondi has not been added to the list of Scheduled languages; nor have Mundari and Oraon with 7.2 million and 1.1 million speakers respectively. However, due to their large populations in several pockets, as in south Bastar, parts of Adilabad, etc., the language still retains a strong vitality. Incidentally, the language of the central Indian Maoists is Gondi.

Today vast populations of indigenous peoples migrate to other places where the economic and educational advantages are greater than in their native regions. They inevitably become bilingual in the language of their adopted home with the new language becoming dominant over the course of time. On their visits home many of these people speak their language with many loan words, the first steps of language erosion. Another curious fact is that these *returnees* often speak their version of the language among themselves and, due to its 'higher' status, enter the language of the peer group in the village by way of imitation. These inter-group and inter-individual interactions are complex⁶ whereby new norms and structures evolve. New loan words and concepts become a part of the original language which may weaken the vitality of the language.

Of the 176 indigenous languages listed in the Census of India 2011, none were included as a Scheduled Language until 2001. In 2001 this was 'rectified' with the inclusion of Bodo (a Tibeto-Burmese language with about 15,00,000 speakers) and Santhali (an Austro-Asiatic language with 72,00,000 speakers). To have a clearer view about how tribal languages fare in India, it helps to look at the figures of bilingualism. As David Crystal⁷ remarks, 'multilingualism is the normal human condition'; however, the lan-

guage a people are bilingual in tells of an existing cultural dislocation that will lead to a linguistic dislocation.

Bilingualism⁸ has increased in India from 19.44% (1991) to 24.79% (2001) to 26.01% in 2011. All the 14 tribal groups speaking Austro-Asiatic languages are bilingual in Odia, Bengali and Hindi; only the Khasi also speak English. And the 45 tribal groups speaking Tibeto-Burmese languages are bilingual in only one tribal language, Lushai/Mizo, though many also speak English.

Of the 99 tribal languages surveyed, which include the clusters of languages not included in the analysis as there are less than 10,000 speakers, bilingualism was reported in *only* 11 languages. These tribal people spoke Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Odia, Assamese, Bengali, English, Nepali, Manipuri, Halbi and Lushai/Mizo, of which only the last two are tribal. Except English, the rest are all Scheduled Languages of the states; all except Telugu, Manipuri and Lushai/Mizo belong to the Indo-Aryan language family. The overall trend is one of a few dominant (mostly non-tribal) languages becoming second languages of many hundreds of other language speakers. This implies a cultural influence which will have an impact on the domains that will continue to be used in the original languages: a change in their vitality is inevitable in the long run.

The other WhatsApp group mentioned in the beginning turned up a curiosity. This is also a Durwa indigenous group of educated youth, many of them working at small jobs in small towns in the district, away from their native villages. Here the discussions are exclusively in Bastariya Hindi, a pidgin form of Hindi and Halbi. Communications are carried on mainly in the Devnagiri script, on subjects ranging from information about job vacancies in the district (in the forest department, in mining companies, in schools) as well as about adivasi pride and identity.

Postings include upcoming tribal festivals and talks by tribal politicians and leaders. A whole series of exchanges centred around adivasi people not being Hindu, for instance. But seldom was it about their forest-based heritage, the ongoing implementation of the Forest Rights Act, or other issues concerning the community as a whole.

At one point during this discussion, I asked of the group why we don't converse in Durwa, and about 'Durwa matters.' The initial responses were rather apologetic, with a few people admitting that they do not speak the language. But quite soon someone declared that he felt hurt if a '*nakli* Durwa',⁹ meaning me, made fun of them not speaking their language. Then others joined in, in a similar vein, and silenced me, and the exchanges continued as before. I had assumed that language was an integral part of cultural identity but here was an instance where ethnic identity was asserted in a newly acquired hybrid pidgin.

The notion that colonial languages such as English and French have 'wiped out' native languages needs revisiting. There are only 2,60,000 people who claim their mother tongue as English in India. As in other parts of Asia, which was colonized by the British, a very negligible proportion of the native peoples – usually the elite – speak English, the rest speaking their own languages or a version, usually pidgin, a kind of speciation of the language. Where business negotiations are conducted between countries in English – as in India, Singapore, Malaysia, etc. – the lower-ranking workers, who form most of the staff in any transaction, continue to speak their own languages. This is the case in most of the south-east Asian countries as well as in Africa, and it has given birth to more than a hundred creole languages,¹⁰ each with its own stable lexicon, a consistent system of grammar, and where children learn it as their native language.

Though the decadal increase of English

speakers has risen in India to 14.67 (2001-11), and people bilingual in English have probably increased as well, there is little evidence of it 'taking over' native languages. In fact, it is evident that more than the colonial languages it is the native dominant languages, whether state or official, that erode the vitality of tribal languages.

Policies that curtail the access of indigenous people to their natural environments, as with legislations concerned with tiger or other wildlife conservation, are factors that impact tribal languages. Such policies limit the traditional experience domains of the community, distancing people from the flora and fauna and their landscapes, thereby putting a large section of their lexicon into disuse. Over time the younger generation's ability to speak their language as well as their elders, and to teach it to their children, will be limited and negatively affect language vitality.

By itself, language is an abstract concept: it is the speaker(s) who give it a reality by speaking it. Its vitality can be known by seeing the number of knowledge-experience domains it is used in. One notices that the spread of any 'big' language, such as Odia, make the children of parents speaking a 'minor' language (such as Juang, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken in Odisha) speak the dominant language, perhaps maintaining the mother tongue only in the home domain. The next generation may have switched to Odia altogether and may, or may not, decide to learn and speak Juang like her grandparents: it is a decision dependent on social, political, economic and psychological factors, whose combination continuously change and remain difficult to predict. This is quite in line with the fate of a species in varying ecological and climatic conditions, individual elements of which affect the vitality and robustness of the organism, and its potential to survive.

Section 29(1) of the Constitution of India says that 'Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same.' This is like stating that an organism or species has the right to grow and thrive in a certain region, without also making sure that the conditions for doing so exist. The above analysis on bilingualism also raises the question of whether giving a language a Scheduled or official status changes anything on the ground, in terms of the vitality and maintenance of the language. For instance, would giving the Kamar or Chenchu languages an official status, but denying the peoples their 'natural ecologies',¹¹ in terms of their ways of life and territories, in any way be enhancing the vitality of the languages? The Kamar need to harvest bamboo and process it into various handicraft; the Chenchus, honey hunters par excellence, with a language that transcends the tangible regarding simple honey collection, require the freedom to practice their tradition that will encapsulate their full vocabulary related to honey collection.

The example of Sanskrit shows that despite full official support a language will not grow. It has less than 25,000 registered speakers in 2011,¹² shows a decadal increase, but it can hardly be claimed that the language is vital. Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra have between 2300-3800 speakers each; there are a few hundred speakers in some states, and none or negligible numbers in most. Yet, it is a Scheduled language as it is part of India's heritage: there may not have been any intention to promote it beyond a status that is propped up artificially, the foundation being wishful hope and funds. Over the last three years more than Rs 640 crore¹³ have been spent to promote this language; there are TV channels broadcasting Sanskrit news; there are newspapers and institutions that publicize the language. However, it is doubt-

ful whether the language will attain any vitality in the sense of people learning it and passing it on to the next generation.

Languages need their space-times to survive and remain vital and, if that is missing, no legislation will help. What we need to keep a language vital, and to maintain it, would be to keep intact its 'natural ecology' – both social, which implies socio-economic organizations, and non-social ecologies, meaning the landscapes – which is different than a legislative or a political decision to give it a certain status.

It has been remarked¹⁴ that the maximum linguistic diversity is found along the equatorial rainforest. The size and density of the forests such as in Borneo, the Amazon and the Congo may allow for the communities to exercise all their knowledge and experience domains fully. Where there is language contact it may allow for multilingualism without a selection process eliminating one or the other. Whatever the case, it is doubtful that state, or national, policies to preserve them have played a positive role, other than in not destroying these natural ecologies. People-centric conservation policies, that encourage the experience of all traditional knowledge-domains of a people, might lead to better linguistic diversity.

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Footnotes:

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2. S. Mufwene, 'The Ecology of Language: Some Evolutionary Perspectives,' in E. Kioko, N.N. do Couto, D.B. de Albuquerque and G.P. de Araújo (eds.), *Da Fonologia a Ecolinguística*. Thesaurus, Brasília, 2013.
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4. In the Census of India, 2011, the survey on bilingualism among the Parji group responded with Halbi as their only bilingual language; among the Parji, the Durwa are the only peoples with more than 10,000 speakers and hence figure in the Census.
5. Halbi is spoken by about 7,65,464 speakers, the majority of whom reside in Chhattisgarh. Source: Language Census 2011.
6. S. Mufwene, 2013.
7. D. Crystal, *How Language Works*. Penguin Press, Australia, 2008.
8. Bilingualism is a self-declared characteristic, not measured or tested according to any scale.
9. Literally 'fake.'
10. The largest spoken creole is Haitian Creole with about 10 million speakers; Tok Pisin, spoken in Papua New Guinea, has about four million speakers.
11. A phrase coined by the Brazilian linguist, Hildo Honório do Couto.
12. All figures from the Census of India, 2011.
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Languages, territories and a name: a short history of FYROM, a country in Southeast Europe

Imre Szigeti

There is a country in Europe that until a few years ago was named 'FYROM'. The abbreviation stood for the country's official name: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. This name was widely accepted by the UN and connected today's North Macedonia to former Yugoslavia.

The history of the term 'FYROM' covers only 26 years, from 1993 to 2019. Originally, Macedonia was part of the Yugoslav Federation (officially called the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), created as such by Josip Broz Tito, the president of Yugoslavia after a country's internal reorganization of the public administration. The territory was considerably bigger before WWI and was called 'Vardar', a name which is based on the major river of the province.

The socialist Yugoslavia entered into a phase of secession in June 1991, and within a year the entire federation broke up. Thus, in September 1991 the territory in question declared its independence from the rest of the federation and called itself the 'Republic of Macedonia'. This name was accepted right away by the Serbian part of the federation, which was the only remaining state within former Yugoslavia that the new state had a border with. This border in the north was further secured by 500 UN-soldiers; even today this is the most peaceful border of former Yugoslavia.

The Republic of Macedonia, however, was not recognized by Greece, their southern neighbour. Moreover, Greece made enormous efforts to prevent international recognition of the new state. Their argument is based on historical evidence, which is evident from the map below.



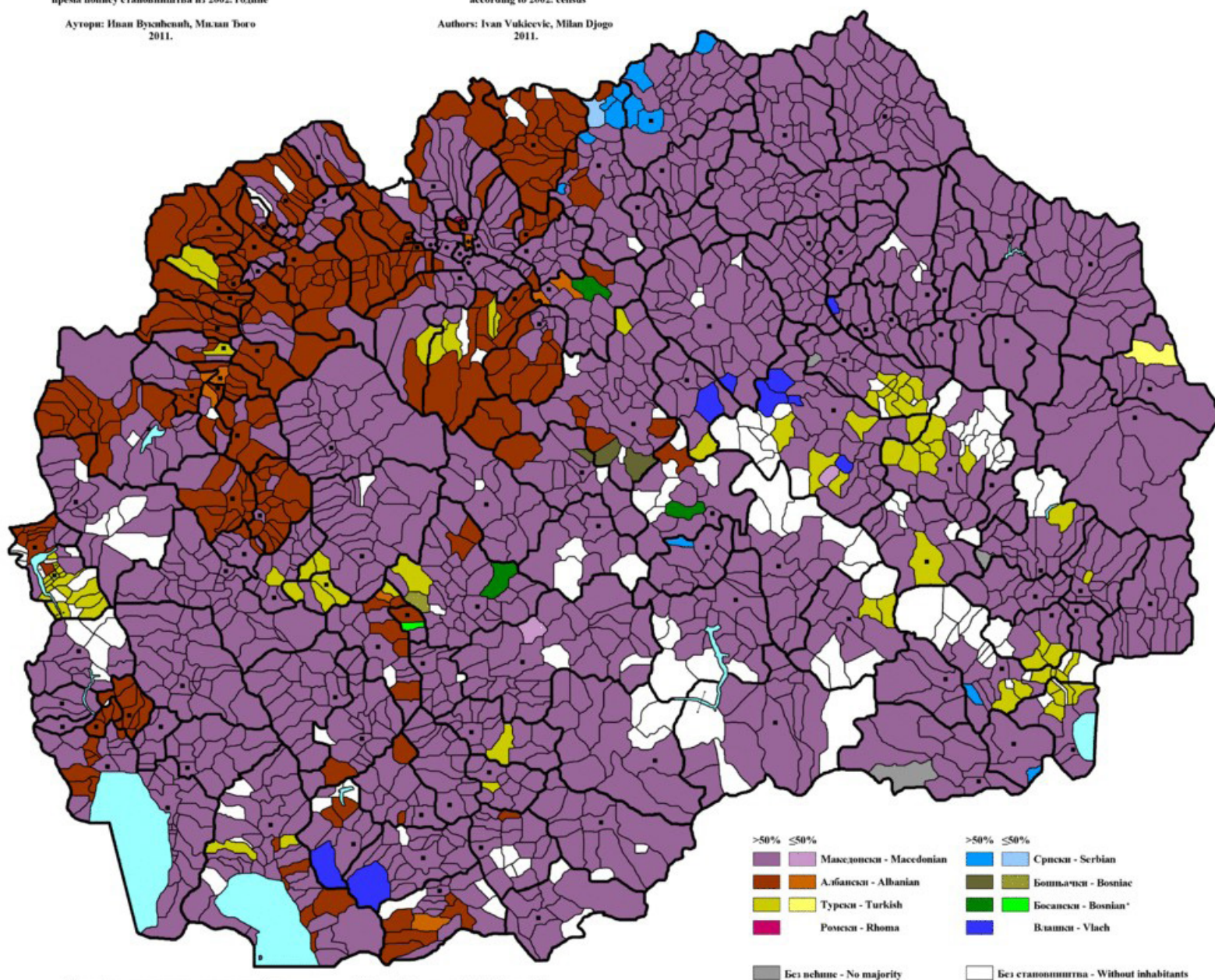
As shown, the geographical term 'Macedonia' – which is a reduction of the historical Macedonia under Alexander the Great – consists of territories in Serbia (+Kosovo), Bulgaria, Albania and Greece, plus the territory of the new republic. The Greek part of historical Macedonia is called Macedonia as well, and is one of the major provinces of the country. Greece could not accept that an independent country had the same name as one of its own provinces and thus always emphasized that the new republic does not represent the whole of (historical-geographical) Macedonia. Greece's blockade was successful: the new state was allowed to join the UN only after accepting its new name, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), in 1993.

The peculiarity of the situation can further be characterized by the linguistic situation in modern geographical Macedonia in general, and in FYROM in particular. In the Albanian part of historical Macedonia, and in Kosovo, people speak Albanian, a language of a particular branch of the Indo-European language family that uses the Latin alphabet. Similarly, in Greece, Standard Modern Greek (SMG) is spoken, another separate branch of the same language family (but which uses the Greek alphabet). The ancient Macedonian dialect is alive as well; it is spoken in many Greek villages in the northern part of the country. In Serbia, the FYROM-Macedonian variety is spoken although with many loanwords from Serbian (using both the Latin and the Cyrillic alphabet). And in Bulgaria, Standard Bulgarian is used with the Cyrillic alphabet, a member of the Eastern South Slavic language family. But what is 'FYROM-Macedonian'? To answer this question consider the below linguistic map of Macedonia, based on the 2002 census.

The areas in purple show the territories in which Macedonian is spoken. This is an Eastern South Slavic language which has a high degree of mutual intelligibility with Bulgarian (similar to Czech and Slovak in Central Europe): speakers of both "languages" have no problems understanding each other. For political reasons, however, the languages in question are considered to be different languages.

According to the census of 2002, around 25% of the Macedonian population (a predominantly Christian population of 2.1 million people) speak Albanian (shown as brown patches on the map). They have a high level of political and cultural autonomy as well.

Greece and FYROM have tried many times since 1993 to find a solution to the naming conflict, but the dispute was in a deadlock for many years. Meanwhile, FYROM-Macedonia was trying to establish their domestic Macedonian identity, always with reference to the ancient Greek past (e.g. through the building of statues for Alexander the Great and Philip of Macedon). This made the Greeks more and more reluctant to reach a compromise. Finally, the leftist government of Alexis Tsipras (2015-19) started serious negotiations that ended in the Prespa agreement in 2018: according to this agreement, FYROM took the name 'Republic of North Macedonia' and Greece recognized the state with this name through a friendship agreement as well. Moreover, the parliaments of both countries have ratified the agreement without difficulty (as of July 2018). Thus, a couple of days later, North Macedonia received the invitation to start NATO accession talks. The new country became a member of the military alliance in February 2019, and this is how the story of the country with this strange name ends.



* Босански је у резултатима пописа сврстан у групу Остали.
 * Населба Влашки и Одрови су у резултатима пописа наведена као део општине Дебар, уместо као део општине Центар Жупа.

* Bosnian is in the census results included in group Other.
 * Settlements Vlasici and Odrinci are listed in the census results as part of municipality of Debar instead as a part of municipality of Centar Zupa.

Imre Szigeti is a Hungarian linguist at present based in India. He is currently working on a Hungarian-Greek dictionary.

A Juanga village in Keonjhar

Pravat Mishra

Gudinarda is a small Juanga Village of Telkoi Block in Keonjhar district in Odisha. The 72 Juanga families with a population of 433 primarily depend upon the forest and its resources for their livelihood. Telkoi is the block of Keonjhar district which has a lot of forest cover. Gudinarda village is 60 km away from the Block headquarters, has no road connectivity and no government official visits the village. The village falls within Talapada Gram Panchayat (GP) and the people collect their rations from GP headquarters by walking about 11km.

other vegetables in their fields as well as their backyards. They practice mixed cropping because they do not rely on particular crop. They also prepare the fields for others in a festival known as "Bhuibandha utsav".

The Juanga Development Agency (JDA), a Government Agency, is working for the socio-economic upliftment of the Juangas in the Banspal and Telkoi blocks of Keonjhar. The major activities undertaken by the JDA are land development under MGNREGS, animal husbandry, mango orchard creation, potato cultivation support, providing loans to SHGs and, recently, a Rs 5000/- covid support to affected families. However none of these activities see community involvement as a necessity. Instead, specific households



Back yard cultivation of Sapana Juanga

Juangas are designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) who live on the hillslopes and seldom in the plains. They are mainly food gatherers and hardly cultivate. However they now practice some highland cultivation during the monsoon such as paddy, kangu, mustard, maize and

who are capable of voicing their needs better, get the benefit of these schemes and programmes whereas the majority are not aware of these privileges. In order to access these schemes and programmes, the Juangas have to travel about 12 km from the village.

Six years ago, Gudinarda village was affected by Left Wing Extremism where the Maoists resided in the hills and forests adjacent to the village. Now, this problem has been solved but there is no significant improvement has taken place in the village. Sabitri Juanga, the Sarpanch of Talapada, bemoans the fact that there is no all-weather road to the village, nor is there any good source of drinking water. Though there is an anganwadi and a primary school neither of these have drinking water supply. The entire village depends on a well through out the summer.

Out of 72 families, 35 families were allotted houses under different housing schemes. But no contractor is willing to work in the village and matters remain as they are. The Regional Centre for Development Cooperation (RCDC) is facilitating the Habitat Rights in the Juanga Community. Meetings were held with officials in the ITDA, the Special Project Officer, Assistant Conservator of Forests, the Sarpanch, and various Juanga leaders, local NGOs and CBOs, to identify the Juanga traditional landscape so that the area could be mapped, and the dependency of the community on forest resources could be assessed. The leaders of the traditional institutions shared their customary laws and systems which revealed the relationship between the kings and the Juanga and their resource usage.

The Juanga protect, conserve and manage the forests as it is their habitat. Having realised that there is possibility of Habitat Rights under the FRA 2006, the community leaders have come forward to claim their rights over the entire landscape that they have lived in and depended on for generations. However, many issues have to be resolved. RCDC staff, Ananda and Bira Nayak, visited the above mentioned village and shared the details with the Tasildar and Block Development Officer to facilitate communication regarding the necessity of building a road so that the village become accessible.

The media also been used to highlight this issues.



Juanga women collecting water from streams and nallahs.

Pravat Mishra is a senior staff of RCDC based in Bhubaneshwar, Odisha.

War on Honey Bees

Pandurang Hegde

It was in early February 2021 when Bhargav, a young bee keeper, shifted twenty bee boxes to Gaudalli to harvest the first honey of the season. He was in high spirits and looking forward to a good yield as the glyricidia flowers were in full bloom with the nectar and the weather conditions good for bee keeping. The clear honey from these flowers has very good aroma and quality, with very little moisture content.

After two weeks Bhargav returned to Gaudalli to harvest the honey, with high hopes. He was shocked to find that thousands of bees were dead outside the bee boxes. "Instead of honey, I found that almost ten colonies were totally decimated, and the rest were trying to survive. I lost more than 80 thousand bees; the sight of the dead bees was devastating". He set about cleaning the dead bees from his boxes, instead of harvesting honey and was totally shattered at the sight. It seemed like someone had unleashed a war on the bees, those simple friendly creatures that provide the best food in the world.



It was obvious that pesticides sprayed on the nearby areca gardens were the main cause for the death of bees. The farmer had not informed Bhargav about his intention to spray; an advanced notice would have given Bhargav a chance to shift his colonies to a safer place and save them. But now it was too late, he had to suffer the loss.

During March and April, which is the best season to harvest honey, Prakruti received many distressed calls from bee keepers who lost their colonies due to extensive spraying of pesticides in the Sirsi region. This region is well known for spice and areca gardens, and landscapes suitable for horticulture crops. Pollination is very crucial for good yields of cash crops like areca and cardamom. Traditionally farmers were engaged in bee keeping, not only to get honey but also for pollination. The cultivation practices involved organic methods of farming, rather than the use of chemical inputs and pesticides. However, in recent years, the situation has changed drastically. Farmers use chemical inputs, especially dangerous cocktails of pesticides, on horticulture crops.

The horticulture department suggested mixing various pesticides as a measure to control the dropping of young areca fruits. Spraying of this deadly cocktail was the main reason for the death of the bees. Ironically it is the same horticulture department that propagates bee keeping through various government schemes. When Prakruti took this issue up with them, the department suggested that the bees be kept inside the box for two days with adequate sugar feeding! They also advocated spraying only during early morning or late evening hours, which is impractical. Such suggestions show the contradiction in the government policies towards honey bees and pollination.

A detailed study conducted by scientists in Odisha found that the use of pesticides has negative impacts on indigenous *Apis cerana* honey bees. The field sites were

Panchaligeswar, a low intensity cropping site, and Jaleswar, a high intensity cropping site with heavy use of pesticides.

The study showed that in a pesticide intensive agricultural landscape bees show signs of impaired brain function, leading to loss of memory. This affects the pheromones which leads to a loss of sensory memory to return to the colony after collecting the pollen. The bees which come back to the colony with contaminated foraging material accelerate the impact of the next generation of honey bees reared on this pesticide ridden food.

The study findings state that "hence it not only shows the adverse effects of pesticide exposure on an important behaviour such as memory loss due to brain damage of the honey bees but also delves into the underlying micro structural and neuro-physiological processes contributing to such changes. Damaged olfaction thus might have critical consequences for the very survival of honey bees."

Increased use of weed killer, especially Round Up or glyphosate, damages the beneficial bacteria in the guts of honeybees and makes them more prone to deadly infections. The research findings show that it damages the microbiota that honey bees need to grow and fight pathogens.

Research conducted in China showed that honey bee larvae grew more slowly and died more often when exposed to glyphosate. It impairs the cognitive capacities of adult bees to successfully return to the hive.

Another shocking aspect is that in India this weed killer is sprayed not only on agricultural crops, but is used extensively in natural forest regions as well. The forest department has started using it for drawing fire lines, and it has recognised the use of weed killer as a major component of fire control measures. Thus, in addition to agricultural land where use of pesticides and weed killer has increased drastically, its use in



natural habitats like forest will have a devastating impact on the flora and fauna, including wild and domesticated honey bee populations. *Apis dorsata* or the giant Rock Bee is a major source of pollinator of agricultural and horticultural crops.

The use of neo neonicotinoid pesticides, which are the chemicals added as a seed coating to crops like corn or soya, which reduces the need of spraying, has caused extensive damage to honey bees all over the world, and these are used extensively, harming our bees.

The death of the wild Rock Bees will have a negative impact on NTFP collectors who are involved in honey hunting in forest regions. Even the honey collected from wild forest regions may have pesticide residues. Thus, our assumption that wild forest honey is 'pure' may not hold good in the future.

Extensive mono cropping and habitat destruction has led to shortage of foraging plants for the bees, causing decline in hon-

ey bee population worldwide. According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation, bees are responsible for about 80 % of the pollination, making them vital to agriculture. But the most dangerous impact of the death of wild bee colonies is on the pollination of crops in India that will lead to the reduction in yields.

(first published in NATURE : 27 July 2015; <https://www.nature.com/articles/srep1250480>)

Reference:

Chakrabarti, P. et al Field populations of native Indian honey bees from pesticide intensive agricultural landscape show signs of impaired olfaction

Pandurang Hegde is an activist based in Sirsi, Karnataka, and the founder of the Appiko movement.

Northern developments

Wiert Wiertsema

Er gaat niks boven Groningen! Meaning 'Nothing goes above Groningen!' is a saying in the province with this name, located in the north of the Netherlands, at the edge of the Wadden Sea. It refers to the Low Countries ending there, also suggesting that nothing is more beautiful than this province.

mer days, some supplying fruit, or timber for construction, wooden shoes, and twigs for brooms to keep settlements clean. Groceries came from nearby Oudeschip, the northernmost village of the mainland of the Netherlands. Sweet memories of a plain paradise.

By the time I went to school, a huge deposit of natural gas was found below this paradise. Until today more than 2.100 billion m³



Earthquake damage to Groningen house

Well over 6 and a half decades ago I was born there. I grew up right at the foot of the dike that separated this unique sea with its mudflats and salt marshes from fertile agricultural fields. No forest lands, but wide horizons and tall skies over swaying fields of grain, potatoes, and meadows in flower. Vegetable gardens and domestic animals provided the essentials for local peoples' diets. Trees were mostly functional, providing wind protection and shade on warmsum-

gas has been pumped out of Groningen's soil. The Dutch government earned about € 420 billion², and the companies exploring and marketing this gas surely made neat profits on top of that. Natural gas replaced coal to become the main source of energy and heating in the country. Large scale exports generated vast and fast earnings, triggering unexpected economic hazards for which the IMF coined a new term: the Dutch disease³.



Tidal salt marsh, now replaced by the new port

Sadly for many people of Groningen the gas exploration was a disaster, and in slow motion. Soil subsidence and small tremors occurred regularly ever since explorations began, but in 2012 a bigger earthquake triggered widespread alarm.

Until today many additional quakes have taken place and thousands of houses and

other buildings contracted damages, triggering widespread concerns about the safety of people's homes⁴. While many families are still waiting for effective compensation measures to be put into place, and their patience is being overstretched, the gas exploration in Groningen is being brought to an early closure⁵.



View of industrialisation of the Oostpolder. Bottom left shows the farmhouse where the author spent his youth

Despite the riches generated from under its soil, the Groningen province always remained the poorest region in the country. To stimulate industrial activity, the Dutch government decided in the early 70s to replace the mudflats and salt marshes behind the dike, near my home, with a sea port. A gas-fired thermal power plant was built, with high voltage power lines contaminating the horizon, and promises of new roads to

come. Busloads of tourists were brought to the port for daytime outings on cruise ships, lured with tax-free shopping sprees out at sea. As paradise retreated no serious industrialization or new job opportunities showed up.

Changes in logistic services in the 21st century finally triggered many new economic activities in the port. New power plants,



View of the Oostpolder area from the dike at Oudeschip

including a huge coal-fired one, off-shore wind energy services, and massive new energy gobbling data centers for world wide internet services, were established. Where initially the port grabbed land from the sea, the latest news is that 600 hectares of fertile agricultural land are set to be taken from local farmers to host hydrogen factories to serve a green energy transition. Apparently a 'master plan' was finalized for this in 2019, but local communities are informed by local authorities only recently. When news of this development emerged a few months ago, many local people once more started to protest. Many people who continue to enjoy the largely rural setting feel cheated by the local authorities. The virtual value of their properties has seriously dropped ever since the latest plans were disclosed. That the farmers who will lose their land register protest may hardly be surprising⁷.

The plain paradise of my youth is set to be lost forever. It seems to be my turn to become an old man dreaming of a lost world from his younger days when everything was better. Only few people express hopes that the latest developments will bring them better jobs and new business opportunities. Surely the northern tribe that still believes in development is shrinking.



View of Oudeschip, the northernmost village of the mainland of the Netherlands



View of Oudeschip, the northernmost village of the mainland of the Netherlands

Wiert Wiertsema works on International Financial Institutions and is based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Footnote

1 <https://www.nam.nl/feiten-en-cijfers/gas-winning.html#iframe=L2VtYmVkJ2NvbXB-vbmVudC8aWQ9Z2Fzd2lubmluZw>

2 <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2019/22/aardgasbaten-uit-gaswinning-bijna-417-mil-jard-euro>

3 <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/basics/dutch.htm>

4 Substantive backgrounds are provided in this website: <https://dwarshuis.com/earthquakes-groningen-gas-field/history-groningen-gas/>

5 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-netherlands-gas-idUSKCN1VV1KE>

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India's Palm Push in A&N Islands Puts 'Atmanirbharta' Before Real Self-Sufficiency

Madhu Ramnath

- *In August 2021, the Union cabinet approved an outlay of Rs 11,040 crore for a proposal to expand palm-oil production in India, with a thrust on the A&N Islands.*
- *A host of natural events, set to become more unpredictable in the age of climate change, make the islands quite unsuitable to cultivate oil palm.*
- *Instead, India could consider promoting the traditional cultivation of edible oils and tree-borne oils, which could help Indigenous and marginalised farmers both.*

The issue of expanding palm-oil production in India – which the government has justified as a saviour of our foreign exchange – resurfaced in August 2021. The Union cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved an outlay of Rs 11,040 crore for the proposal, towards its ultimate goal to have 1 million ha under palm and becoming atmanirbharta, or 'self-sufficient,' in oil.

This goal was already present in the 'VISION 2030' document of the government's Department of Oil Palm Research (DOPR), together with promises to easily avail land to corporate owners and to remove the 25-ha ceiling. The currently novel aspect of the venture is the name – National Mission on Edible Oils – Oil Palm (NMEO-OP), with a thrust on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the northeastern states.

India is the world's leading vegetable oil importer, and whose exports in May 2021 shot up 68% from last year. Of this, palm oil accounted for 60%. In 2005, India had an

import duty of 80% on palm oil; in 2008 this was reduced to zero, and later, hiked to 15%. It now stands at 30.25% for crude oil and 41.25% for refined palm oil, including cesses and other charges.

It is remarkable that in the government's update, the cabinet categorically approved the plan despite the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education not having agreed to palm-oil plantations in biodiverse areas like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These islands are home to 2,650 species of flowering plants, of which 223 species are endemic and 1,300 species don't occur on the mainland.

In the decades past, rampant deforestation here has wreaked havoc. Today, thousands of hectares face severe erosion and have lost their topsoil. They also suffer from poor drainage, low nutrient status and coarse soil textures, affecting a sizable fraction of the land in the south and middle Andamans. These conditions are contrary to what is ideal for oil palm cultivation: fertile and stable soil that imposes no limits on root development.

In addition, the average annual precipitation in Port Blair is 2,870 mm, which would be good were it not for the fact that it is not evenly spread. In fact, the islands have low or no rainfall for five or six months of the year. The islands also lie in the path of tropical cyclones, which can't be good for palm-oil plantations.

Previous concerns about the spread of palm oil in other countries, notably Malaysia, Indonesia and countries in Latin America and Africa, have brought to fore various problems that typically follow in their wake. Some of them are deforestation, land-rights violations, water scarcity, declining biodiversity, loss of the commons and greenhouse emissions. In most of the 14 Indian states that the DOPR has targeted, the primary source of irrigation for the



An oil palm plantation in Johor, Malaysia, photographed in February 2019.
Photo: Reuters/Edgar Su

palms is or will be bore-wells. But bore-wells in these and other parts of India have already been blamed for sinking the water table, worsening water scarcity and salinity, and other problems.

Through all these activities, directed by a state-corporate nexus, Indigenous peoples and landscapes have suffered the most.

The government's present thrust on palm-oil expansion emphasises higher capital investment, employment generation, reduced import dependence and claims that the initiative will benefit farmers. The mission has included a 'viability price' to buffer farmers against international fluctuations of the price of crude palm oil, and promises various inputs and other forms of assistance. The subsidy for planting material has more than doubled, to Rs 29,000/ha, and the mission is to replace old plants at Rs 250/plant. The mission will also subsidise seed gardens, terracing, bio-fencing and land clear-

ance costs, while the industry is set to receive higher power capacities.

It is obvious that India is thirsty for edible oil. But can palm-oil plantations be the answer? As many countries in the European Union, and the US, are moving away from palm oil, on account of its deleterious consequences, the sole reason for India to continue on its path is the math.

If harvests are optimum, palm oil requires about 15-times less land than traditional oils for similar yield. However, yields in India have been far lower than that in Indonesia and Malaysia, and we can't wish away the reality of low rainfall in most Indian states.

Further, despite farmers across India traditionally producing many of the other edible oils – without requiring the sort of investments palm oil seems to warrant – the India state has made little effort to encourage them. Different communities in India have

traditionally identified with specific oils: mustard oil in Bengal, sesame oil in Tamil Nadu, coconut oil in Kerala, mahua oil in much of Central India, etc. This has lent a characteristic flavour to their cuisines. But of the various tree-borne oils that had been targeted in 28 states, only 11 states have implemented the programmes, despite budgets allocated for the purpose. The Union cabinet has overlooked some more points relevant to the palm-oil expansion, and are worth considering. For three examples:

1) palm oil has a longer gestation period before the yields begin, and the present outlay of subsidies may not be sufficient;

2) with climate change, tropical cyclones in the Andaman Islands may trigger events not conducive to palm oil, given the already deteriorating land there.

3) In much of India, groundwater extraction exceeds the recharge rate – in some states by 100%. This water source already supports 60-70% of agriculture in India, meets

50% of urban needs and 80-95% of rural drinking-water needs. Then there is the industrial sector, the numbers for which are not easily available, but are bound to be significant. There are already around 40 million bore-wells around India, and many states have declared that their reserves are up to 60% vulnerable.

If the rate of groundwater consumption continues at this rate, half the demand for water in the country is not likely to be met by 2030. Groundwater depletion is also accompanied in India's north and east by increasing heavy-metal toxicity.

For this wealth of reasons, the Union cabinet would be wise to rethink the NMEO-OP, and include other edible oils as well as tree-borne oils in its future plans. The obvious advantages are that the latter are not nearly as water-depleting – a factor whose importance we can't overstate – and will help support Indigenous peoples and marginalised farmers alike.



Notably, at present, the palm-oil expansion is controlled by four major players: 3F Oil Palm Agrotech, Godrej Agrovet, Ruchi Soya and Navbharat. And together, they are responsible for around 80% of India's palm-oil cultivation. Counter to such centralisation of opportunity and fortune, these other oils will also help maintain biodiversity and promote the diversity of tastes and cuisines already at the heart of Indian food ways.

And finally, these oils will provide for a gender-sensitive livelihood option – something that has disappeared from palm-oil plantations around the world.

India's palm-oil push is linked to the changes in its forest policies, especially the Compensatory Afforestation Fund, and to bring in the corporate sector to help afforest degraded lands.

Finally, it may be worth reflecting on whether India's 'atmanirbharta' push with palm oil will allow the government another advantage. In early 2020, Malaysia's then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad criticised India's decision to abrogate Article 370 of the Constitution and said it treats its minorities badly. The comment precipitated a stand-off between India and Malaysia for some months, but India's low oil-stock and the formation of a new government in Malaysia helped restore trade.

India imports mineral fuels, oils, nuclear reactors, precious stones, bituminous substances, petroleum and various other products from a large host of countries, across continents. At the same time, it has repeatedly bristled at comments from experts and leaders in other countries about its response to the COVID-19 crisis, its declining press freedom, iffy human development indicators, room for pseudoscientific health-care practices, etc. It may be worth tracking what the next item on the 'atmanirbharta' agenda could be.

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Painted Beauty

B.Satheesh Muthu Gopal

Since I started birding in 2009, the Greater Painted Snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*) has been one of my dream birds that I wish to encounter. Whenever I go birding in wetlands, I look for a suitable habitat for the Painted Snipe and I search for it. Pallikkaranai Marsh in Chennai is one of the good habitats for the Painted Snipe but, unfortunately, we are losing the habitat due to water pollution. Also, noise pollution in recent years is another factor that cannot be ignored. But still, there are sightings of this species and I searched for it whenever I was in Chennai. Once, when I was birding for a long time, I found another secretive bird in the marsh, the Yellow Bittern, but I couldn't find the Painted Snipe. When I moved to Bangalore and I searched for it whenever I went to the wetlands for birding I never got a chance to see it.

There are two wetlands near Palani, my home town. I have recorded many species in these two wetlands over the last 10 years. But I've kept on searching for the Painted Snipe. Kothaimangalam is one of the wetlands when many waders come in the winter. Though I have recorded the Common Snipe there a few years before, I got a chance to record another snipe this year, the Pin Tailed Snipe. This is also a migratory bird like the Common Snipe.

Another wetland is Idumban Kulam which is very close to Palani town. From the northern bund of the lake the beautiful view of the Palani hills can be seen. A major water source for this lake is the river that flows from the Palani hills. Sandpipers waded on the muddy areas near the lake. Though the Painted Snipe is a resident bird, they are very secretive. A friend of mine, Vishaka Guru, found the Painted Snipe in Idumban Kulam and informed me about its presence. When I went there with another bird enthu-

siast, Karthi, we found the Painted Snipes that week and I felt I could photograph it that morning.

We parked our two-wheelers near a well in which we found a lot of Baya weavers (*Ploceus philippinus*) nesting. They were very active in the early morning hours. But we were focused on the Painted Snipe and moved, reaching the northern bund. The hills across us, glistened in the sunrise. We could see the grasslands near Pazhamputhur in the upper slopes.

It was the beginning of the southwest monsoon. The water level was low and muddy along the periphery, and most places were covered with lilies, blocking our view from what was beneath. We waited for a long time but couldn't spot any Painted Snipe. We decided to walk south and wait. A flock of Cotton Pygmy Goose (*Nettapus coromandelianus*) was circling above the lake now and then. A lone Lesser Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*) was sitting on an outcrop in the middle of the lake. There were Spot-billed Ducks flying above us and scating on the lake.

The lake is a very good habitat for the Pheasant-tailed Jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*) and there were quite a few that day. There were juvenile darters (*Anhinga melanogaster*), partially white in colour, perched on a tree. We both observed all these birds but couldn't find a Painted Snipe. We stood apart and searched separately in different areas. Suddenly I heard a call of the Painted Snipe and Karthi was looking at me, wondering whether I had noticed. We heard the call again and again, but the water lilies hid the beauties somewhere. We got tired and came back to where we had begun. Two stray dogs, probably the regular visitors to the lake, jumped into the lake and tried to catch the Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*). Stray dogs are a major threat to wildlife nowadays.



Painted Snipe

The lucky Stilt escaped from the dogs but the ambience was disturbed.

We would have easily spotted the Painted Snipe by playing a call of the bird on our mobile phones. But we felt it is unethical and decided to give up: our search had begun at exactly 6:00 am and it was 10 am. The four hours yielded many sightings but my wish was not fulfilled. We returned to the well and the Baya weavers were still active. Farmers in Tamil Nadu say that if the Baya Weavers nest at the top of the well the monsoon will bring more rain.

The next day, Karti and I reached the same place at the same time. We went in different directions and Karthi heard the call. I rushed to the spot and searched. It was a pleasant cloudy morning. A peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) called just behind us and the gentle breeze gave the air a freshness. There was no human activity and the bird's noise was slowly louder. It was a small bush with grass on the shore of the lake, where a few

small birds hid. One of them emerged and it was a Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*). I had a deep long breath. Then, after a few minutes, a Common Coot (*Fulica atra*) appeared. The peafowl still calling behind us. The monsoon clouds were covering the upper Palani hills at a distance. I focused on the place where we heard the call and in another 5 minutes, a pair of Greater Painted Snipe appeared, wading and one behind the other, their tails wagging. We watched them for 10 minutes. Unlike most of the other bird species, sexual dimorphism is reversed in the Painted Snipe, the male being duller than the female. Though the male revealed himself much, the female was still hiding. We took a few photographs and moved on. The Peafowl was still calling and the Baya Weavers' nests were swaying in the breeze. Karti and I went up to the Palani hills.

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Some Wild plants of ladakh

Leotopodium ochroleucum



Aquatic herb; canals, fresh-water lakes; stem, leaf used in traditional medicine

Hippuris vulgaris



High altitude moist-rocky slopes; sacred plant, used in incense in Buddhist monasteries

Rheum tibeticum



Herb, high altitude dry and stony slopes; petioles edible (raw); fodder; used in traditional medicine

Saussurea nepalensis



Alpine stony slopes, marshes; used in traditional medicine for stomach ailments

Clematis tibeticum



Climber, dry areas; fodder plant, used for skin ailments in cattle

Pedicularis cheilanthifolia



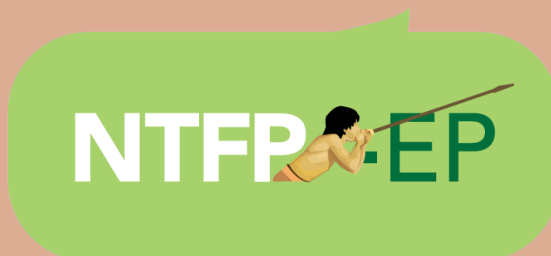
Alpine meadows, valleys; used in traditional medicine to treat blood-related ailments

Reference: Dorjey, K., and Dolma, P; Plants of Ladakh: a photographic guide. Nature Conservation Foundation, India. 2021.

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