

Background information on the Adivasis

Mix for Kids e.V. supports a Don Bosco Mumbai project in Chotta Udaipur, India, to improve the lives of the Rathwa Adivasis (tribal peoples, indigenous peoples).

Composed by Mix for Kids

The Adivasis are "the first ones who were here" – the indigenous inhabitants of India. With over 70 million people and more than 460 peoples and communities, they make up the world's largest indigenous population within the borders of a country.

About 3,500 years ago, Aryans ("the nobles"), shepherd tribes from Central Asia, immigrated and conquered the subcontinent. Some of the indigenous people of that time were oppressed or expelled from their countries, in many cases their land passed into the hands of the conquerors. The Aryans introduced Hinduism as a religion and established the still existing caste system. The caste society has a strongly hierarchical structure classifying people according to their family and their profession by castes. The highest caste is reserved for the Brahmins, the Aryan priests, followed by kings and warriors, craftsmen and farmers down to the Dalits (the "untouchables"). When Adivasi peoples were integrated into the caste system, then mostly as Dalits at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Many Adivasi communities were initially able to avoid this subjugation by retreating into forests and mountains, but were also treated as socially marginalized.

The Adivasis speak languages of Austroasiatic and Dravidian origin. Their economy is traditionally based on self-sufficiency (focus on subsistence). Some of them hunt and gather, others raise livestock, yet others are engaged in shifting cultivation. Today, the Adivasis are increasingly being expelled from their land for industrial and other modernization projects. As a result, they do not only lose their traditional homes but also their livelihood and cultural identity. Millions of Adivasis now live in urban slums and resettlement villages, uprooted from the tribal community, and many of them have fallen into debt bondage. The culture of the Adivasi peoples is under acute threat.

Minorities are formally placed under special protection of the Indian Constitution. These include the "Scheduled Tribes" (the Adivasi tribes registered in the Constitution), the "Scheduled Castes" (the also registered Dalits) and "Backward Castes". For the Dalits and Adivasis, the Constitution provides for quota arrangements to gradually compensate for their historical disadvantage in access to education, work and political representation. According to their share of the total population, the Adivasis are entitled to 7.5 percent and the Dalits to 15 percent of jobs and training positions in the Indian Civil Service or at public universities. In India there is, however, a deep gulf between constitutional rights and reality: Consequently, the Adivasis are represented with only 2.2 percent at the highest level of public service. Up to now, the quota system has mainly led to the development of a small Adivasi elite that has freed itself from its social and cultural background and adapted to the mainstream.

Despite various measures to improve the socio-economic conditions of the "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes", they remain vulnerable and are denied a number of civil rights. They are



increasingly exposed to crime, humiliation, degradation and harassment. In several brutal incidents, they have been robbed of their lives and property. Serious atrocities are being committed against them for various historical, social and economic reasons.

Today, 27 percent of the "Scheduled Castes" and 37 percent of the "Scheduled Tribes" households live below the poverty line, compared with only 11 percent of other households. The "Backward Castes" also suffer from higher rates of illness and death.

Who are the Rathwa Adivasis from Chotta Udaipur?

The Rathwa Adivasis derive their name from the geographical origins of their community. In ancient times, their ancestors lived in a region called Rath, which literally means jungle or hilly region. Colloquially this area is called Rathwistar or the Rath area within the borders of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. They are also called Koli or Koli-Rathwa. According to the 2011 census, the population of the Rathwa was just over half a million people.

Their main occupation is agriculture, with the majority of the population being small to medium-sized farmers. The community is divided into 56 clans, and marriage within the same clan is forbidden. The Rathwa community worships several gods and goddesses, for example for the family, village, animals, marriage, rain, children and women, healing and agriculture. Each god or goddess is worshipped in a common shrine created on the outskirts of the village. Wood-carved totems, terracotta horses and terracotta lamps are the main sacrifices in the shrines of the communities or Devashal (a place where God lives). In recent times, the educated among the Rathwa tribe have decided to join Hindu sects such as Swaminarayan, Satvaikal and Ramanandi.

Pithora Painting

The Rathwa tribe of Gujarat is known for its mural paintings. The images of the Rathwa talk about their social, cultural and mythological life. Pithora painting has its origin in a prayer or ritual to thank God for giving the desired blessing or the fulfillment of a particular goal.

Pithoro is the god of food grain. Pithoro and legends of creation are the traditional themes of Rathwa painting. The main wall of the family homes is dedicated to Pithoro, and the side walls are painted with figures of other deities, spirits and ancestors. The main motifs in these paintings are horses symbolizing the gods, goddesses and ancestors of the Rathwa. The wide range of motifs in the paintings shows various scenes from the daily lives of the Rathwa, their beliefs, mythologies and stories. In modern paintings the Rathwa create a syncretic world view. The scenes of daily life are integrated into traditional elements together with elements of new religions (e.g. Hinduism, Christianity).

The Rathwa used white clay (chalk) as the background for their paintings. The mines, from which the white clay, known as Pandurya (white lord), is extracted are nearby. Before digging the white clay from the mines, the Rathwa offer alcohol and a chicken as sacrifices. This act symbolizes the Rathwa tribe's concern for Mother Earth. They believe that they should get her permission before "tearing her belly open". The main colours red, green, blue, orange and yellow used for the motifs are traditional natural colours, for example red from lead oxide, blue from woad (indigo), yellow from curcuma roots. The powders are mixed with milk and sometimes with alcohol (muhudo) to obtain a liquid colour.



According to studies, Pithora painting originated in the district of Chotta Udaipur about 3000 years ago. In times of modernization and industrialization, this tradition, like many other traditions of the Adivasis, is dying out. Only men from the tribe are allowed to learn this art, but the younger generation moves to the cities to earn their living in a different way.

For the Rathwa, Pithora is much more than just an art. In fact, they never use the word painting when they refer to the Pithora. For them, Pithora is a form of writing, a medium to express their faith, culture and history.



Project to improve the lives of the Rathwa Adivasis (tribal peoples, indigenous peoples)

Source: Don Bosco Chotta Udaipur, India

The aim of the project of Don Bosco Chotta Udaipur is to proactively promote an honourable and assertive, legitimate socio-cultural identity in the tribal youth. In doing so, it is important to promote not only individual development but also community and social development.

The project strives to achieve these goals through three measures:

1. Sports
2. Organic agriculture
3. Career counselling

Organic or alternative agriculture

For their daily living, the tribal peoples were culturally and ecologically completely dependent on the forest. But as forest resources are gradually being exhausted, tribal peoples are forced to look for other livelihoods.

At present, the peoples in the Rath Vistar / Chotta Udaipur region barely know how to combat food shortages; instead, malnutrition prevails. In addition, conventional farming methods do not work sufficiently well. Agricultural yields have fallen drastically. The continued application of traditional methods on the one hand and modern developments such as genetically modified organisms and hybrid seeds on the other hand has driven farming to a dead end. The new technologies of seed producers do not meet the demand, as the seed is not seed-bearing and thus new seed has to be procured every year. Fluctuations in market prices have also increased farmers' economic insecurity. Both global warming and climate change have further exacerbated the situation, especially in the Adivasi tribal regions. The vulnerability of agriculture as a result of global warming was clearly demonstrated in a report published by UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development).

Don Bosco Chotta Udaipur is actively committed to sustainable agriculture and aims to achieve a paradigm shift to increase agricultural productivity through alternative methods. Conventional industrial production, based on monocultures and dependent on the use of large quantities of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, shall be a thing of the past. Instead, Don Bosco Chotta Udaipur sees the future in a small-scale, sustainable and regenerative agricultural production system. In a mixed cultivation system, where partial rows are used for individual crops, very different plants could be cultivated simultaneously and harvested in one season, such as eggplants, chillies, onions, tomatoes, cowpeas, watermelons, beans, bitter cucumbers, lady's fingers, sunflowers, pumpkins and leafy vegetables such as spinach, lettuce and parsley.

The traditional mindset of the Rathwa Adivasis still stands in the way of the production of safe and nutritious food, food security and a better livelihood through organic farming. This leads to the immediate need to empower tribal elders and young people to change their agricultural practices. The aim is for tribal peoples to modify their traditional methods to meet the challenges of climate change and modern, sustainable agriculture.



Initiatives of Don Bosco Chotta Udaipur

The farmers are being trained in various topics. For example, the schedule includes the use of easily obtainable raw materials to produce organic fertilizers such as cow dung, cow urine, jaggery (a kind of brown sugar produced locally) and lentil powder, or the use of organic pesticides made of the leaves of the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*), the carnaja tree (*Pongamia pinnata*) and the calotropis. In addition, farmers are shown how to produce and use native seeds and what their benefits are in order to make the region more economically independent. The use of Mahua, a tropical tree rich in molasses, which is often found there, will make it much easier to earn a living.

A modern, ecological cultivation system, that also takes traditional values into account, aims to encourage young Adivasis in particular to implement and further develop alternative methods – which after all helps the individual, their community and society. Don Bosco Chotta Udaipur is convinced that this change is paramount to the survival of the Adivasis. For this important reason, Don Bosco Chotta Udaipur is committed to this project in the long term. Mix for Kids wants to support this commitment.



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(called up on 1 August 2018)

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