People and Cultural Diversity

Sustainability and Intergenerational Equity
Learnings from Araku Valley

Faith Group 2019-2020
Deepanam School
Auroville
Mahavir’s Acknowledgement

I am glad and thankful that Dr. Thanuja introduced the subject of Anthropology to young students of Deepanam. Also, understanding the sustainability of forest and how mining affects it.

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I am happy to be sharing my year two journey of exploring anthropology with the students of Faith group of Deepanam school with you. It has convinced me even more that the course on ‘People and Cultural Diversity’ is an essential and should start from school. Anthropology gives us the opportunity to learn about ourselves while trying to learn about others. This learning is only possible by pushing oneself out of our comfort zone, the ‘familiar’. This challenges us to practice cultural tolerance and physical endurance becoming novices in the unfamiliar. And as excited and open the young minds and bodies can be, it still remains a challenge. The questions that come to mind, voiced or not through this experience are important as the students and the rest of the team will continue to find answers for a long time to come, refining and redefining the answers.

A few students of the Faith group had been part of the course the previous year and also the report of the previous year, together provided an introduction of what to expect of the course to the new students. We had a different starting point this year, as it was clear that the classroom lectures were an orientation to the learning that would take place through field study. We had decided quite early where we would go and why? ‘Sustainability’ was the key word. We discussed what it meant, is it possible to have sustainable living? What kind of lifestyle should one have? ‘Modern technology’, ‘environment friendly’? What about nature? Can we nurture and nourish from nature ensuring sustainability? Is nature made of resources or life- material or the living or both?

From these questions we moved on to talking about choices and decision makers, issues of sovereignty, market, industrialisation and stopped at two questions: Is subsistence a bad thing? Is it a choice or incapacity, to or not, produce in surplus?

In probing answers to these questions, we choose to study a cultural group that practices subsistence livelihood and to explore if surplus production for profit was practiced or not as a choice or because one lacked the means. For these and other practical logistic reasons, we decided to study Katki village in Araku valley inhabited by Nooka Dora Adivasi group who recently (1990s) fought against their land alienation from mining companies. Mining for minerals destroys the balance of nature- uproots the layers of soil, and the absence of the extracted minerals makes water disappear pushing life and growth to extinction. How can sustainability be possible then? But the commercial profitability of mining is so large that maybe it can compensate the permanent destruction of nature? What should be our stand?

We started our journey for better understanding …

- Thanuja
Our study is located in Araku valley of Visakhapatnam district in Andhra Pradesh state.

Araku was and continues to be popular for tourism, given it’s high mountains and valleys and the trainline built during the colonial era which goes through many tunnels. But our interest in Araku was to understand sustainability and its challenges. We intended to visit adivasi villages and learn from them, learn about forest sustainability and its threat from mining. To understand mining we needed to get an idea of how soil has different minerals and how water and soil can react to make different formations exposing different minerals. Our visit to Borra caves helped in this understanding.

Araku is mainly inhabited by Adivasis, were the predominant communities are the Nookadora and Kondadora. We interacted with the Nookadora in Katki, a village which is close to Borra caves to understand the effect of mining on their life.

We also observed ecotourism in Araku valley which is a coincidence as we stayed in Kollapattu eco tourism resort which is run by the Nookadora of Kollapattu village. Our accommodation was organised through the Tribal Welfare department who had promoted the eco tourism project in Kollapattu village.

Our Journey -Savitri

This is Faith group’s second year of Anthropology class. We chose to go on a field trip to Araku valley in Andhra Pradesh.

We had been talking about this trip at school for quite a while before actually leaving for it. Every Friday morning we had a class with Thanuja, who taught us about Anthropology.

Also the last few days before we left we were all quite excited, getting ready, packing our bags, preparing some food for the long train trip and growing anticipations...

We left Auroville on the Wednesday 22nd of January by train to Visakhapatnam from Pondicherry Railway station.

We had a long journey of 18 hours. We reached Visakhapatnam on 23rd morning. From there we went by autrickshaw to Samata, an NGO run by Mr. Ravi Rebbapragada. We spent the night in a place which used to be a tribal school. It was quite nice and comfortable. Everyone had a nice bed to sleep on.

What a change from the train…
We went for a trip in Araku valley. But since it was way too long to do Pondicherry to Araku valley and back, we decided to stay one night, in Tanuja’s (our teacher) friend’s guest house. It was a big place with a lot of plants and grass. So we went to see our rooms… it was quite big and it was with 2 rows of beds with a blanket, mosquito net, a pillow and a water jug. Some then took a shower and some were chilling and resting. Around 5 pm we took our notebooks and pencils, we went to the kitchen area and started to ask questions. There was also snacks provided. The air was so nice and fresh… Mr. Ravi was talking about how he sees sustainable life and how he came up with the project “Samata”. He has been working for now 35 years for tribal development. The organisation also publishes a magazine called “Dhimsa” (the name of the local dance).

He also told us a story… it was about him and the tribal people. They were going to the market to sell their products and for that they had to climb the hills with around 80 kg on their back. And what I found funny was that they were going faster than Ravi. But Ravi didn’t have anything except his backpack.

-Noor
What is important for Sustainability is Intergenerational Equity.

Do we as a society or a government have the right to extinguish the rights of future generations...

Samata, is a social justice organization working for the rights of the tribal “Adivasi” people of Andhra Pradesh, India and for the protection of the natural resources and ecology of the Eastern Ghats. Mr. Ravi Rebbapragada, the founder and Chairperson of the organisation received us on our arrival. We all gathered in the evening to listen to Mr. Ravi and learnt many new things- books, concepts, authorities. Mr. Ravi was very patient and kind to share his long challenging life experience with us.

A journey that started in 1987 and continues till date. He spoke to us about a book by Paulo Freire, ‘Pedagogy of the oppressed’ and told us to read it when we are older. He spoke about a socialist, state, police, jurisdictions, adivasis, peoples war group, mixed economy, independence, constitution, pillars of the society, land titles, fifth schedule; and told us to look up what it meant. But of course, he tried to explain it all in a way we could understand. He did this by telling us how he got to understand all this through his first 21 day trek through 54 tribal villages and slowly after through everyday interactions with people and as situations demanded. In 1992, he and his team started working in Katki village for ensuring land titles for adivasis of this village and the related issue of mining. This work led to the landmark Supreme court judgement, the Samata vs State of Andhra Pradesh judgement 1997, which cancelled mining leases issued by the government and protected land rights of adivasis. Samata judgement is the only judgement in the last century that has stood the test of time and ruled in favour of indigenous people across the world.

In the last 25-30 years Samata has been running the campaign the ‘health of the hills, is the wealth of the plains’. This is to explain to people in urban areas and to farmers in the plains the need to protect and conserve the hills which alone can ensure water supply for them. Ravi spoke of how cities like Chennai and Bangalore are already facing water shortages, and the growing conflict between industrial and domestic consumption of water. He said that dams that were built promising irrigation to farmers are now supplying to industries. This should be reversed. After Samata judgment they also started a national network on ‘Mines, Minerals and People’ to look into the effects of mining on people.

Mr. Ravi Rebbapragada is the 2012 winner of Godfrey Phillips National Bravery Awards- ‘Social Act of Courage Award’. He is the editor of ‘Dhimsa’, a monthly magazine on tribal issues across the world.

His summing up message for us was that we are the future and the future of nature is our future and therefore our concern. He spoke of development and what should be sustainable and inclusive development and why it is important and that the right approach is to understand the importance of Intergenerational Equity.
Memorable train journey from Vizag to Araku

-Pallavi

After a long train journey from Puducherry to Vishakapatnam and resting overnight in Samata premises at Dabbanda village, everyone had to wake up at 4:00 am on 24th January 2020. It was too early in the morning. We had to get ready to go to Araku valley. Araku Valley is a famous hill station of Andhra Pradesh. It is located at a distance of 120 kms from Visakhapatnam and is famous for its scenic beauty. Located on the Eastern Ghats, it has many valleys, waterfalls and streams flowing by the side of the train track and roads.

Four autos drove us to Vishakapatnam train station from Dabbanda village. After one hour we got there on the train. The journey lasted 4 hours. The view was beautiful. After passing two stations the train was climbing slowly through 58 tunnels and 84 bridges. There were waterfalls on the way, it was a surprise and cool place. The train also passes through the Borra caves station.

Fact: The train line was built to transport iron ore to Visakhapatnam port from the mineral reserves of the neighbouring state of Chattisgarh in the north. Iron ore is transported from mines at Bailadila by this trainline to Visakhapatnam port for export and for consumption by Steel Plants.
Run by the tribals and supported by Tribal Welfare Department, Kollapattu Eco Tourism Resort is beautiful at the foothills of hillocks, surrounded by fields and forest. The resort is built on Kollapattu village land just before the settlement area.

The story goes that in the past there was a small waterfall near Kollapattu village and the tribal youth sustained themselves by selling food and drinks to the tourists who came to visit it. Later when a small dam was built here, the waterfall dried up. As a result they lost their subsidiary seasonal income. To support them the Tribal Welfare department started this project. The youth manage the resort and receive some part of the earnings. As their main occupation is farming, the resort remains closed during cultivation. This Ecotourism project is only a few years old and the Kollapattu village team are learning with time the challenges of the project. They feel it demands a lot more of their labour and time than they expected and our learning to make ends meet. Below are some excerpts from our team interview with Lakshman who manages the resort with a team of other young men and women.

Q: Did this work cause any inconvenience to you?
Lakshman: We are getting tired. 12 hours job becomes 24 hours.

Q: Do you recover your costs?
Lakshman: There is not much profit in food. We do maintenance work out of our own resources. They (ITDA) don't support. We 10 people pooled the money and constructed bathrooms and tents. Sometimes we use our salary for such purposes. They said that they would reimburse. But it takes a lot of time. We don't have a proper kitchen and facilities for drivers. Compound wall is needed to safeguard the property and stop trespassing. We also need vehicles.

Q: Do you have farmlands? Are you full-time in this work?
Lakshman: We own farmlands. From June we stop this work for a couple of months and do farming.

Q: What is your opinion on the food you serve here?
Lakshman: We feel it is better to have locally grown food.

Q: How many households are involved in this project?
Lakshman: Out of 30 households, 10 are involved.

Q: What is your investment?
Lakshman: Nothing much. It was started in 2014. Rooms were constructed by ITDA. We receive rent. Electricity and maintenance, we take care from this. Geysers consume a lot of electricity. ITDA was impressed by our initial work and supported us.

Q: Do you like this project?
Lakshman: Yes. Here both men and women work. Except in our place, nowhere in Araku women are employed. They work in the kitchen.
Kollapattu is a small hamlet approximately 13.4 kms away from the Araku railway station. Located in the beautiful valley, surrounded by hills, streams and paddy fields. It is a perfect haven. There are also pineapple plantations in the village.

We reached Kollapattu on 24th January at 2 p.m. After settling down we took a walk to explore the village and its landscape. We first met Lakshmi, a young lady who warmly received us and chatted giving us a little introduction of the village and its people. She showed us the clay masks and jewellery that she and other women of the village were trained to make. This was part of a government scheme for women’s income generation.

We made friends with a little girl - Jhansi Ran (around the 9yrs) who was kind enough to guide us around the settlement and the cultivation plots.

The landscape had undulating hills with the settlement on one hill and cultivation grounds on higher and lower hills around it.

We found the irrigation of the fields particularly interesting as the plots were cut in a terraced pattern allowing water to fill one plot and then flow on to the next in sequence.
We had no idea what the place where we were staying in Araku Valley would be like until we saw a large poster of the resort in the tribal village, which was just a few hours before we were due to go there.

When we did reach we were pretty amazed by the luxury and comfort of the whole place. (Many of us seemed to be expecting a sort of dormitory style lodging.) Especially the rooms with a TV, comforter, and even hot water. And when we learned that the place was run completely by the tribals, from the neighbouring village, we were even more surprised. (Run by tribals, you would expect something a bit more simpler.) They were running an eco-tourism project started by the government and then handed over to them.

Sometimes it felt kind of weird having all the luxury in our rooms, it was as if the rooms had been plucked out of a Delhi hotel and planted into this remote hillside beside a tribal village. Stepping into our room felt like a whole new world, with the TV screaming Punjabi songs, compared to the cultivation fields, simple and hilly landscape around us.

Before we left our teacher told us we might be staying in the tribal village in different houses. Many of us were really looking forward to that but some of us felt differently and were relieved on how the place turned out. Especially as we got sick it was way easier staying together and being able to help each other out which would have been hard if we stayed separately in the village. We wouldn't have been able to talk and spend time together and get as close as we did had we been staying separately.

But what was really nice about the place was how they managed to integrate nature in the resort. Even the little things, for example the sparrow nest in the roof with little chicks calling. The stream trickling by. Terraces of rice growing outside. The smell of woodsmoke coming from the tribal village nearby… The sound of little boys running down the hillside…

The trip was perfect with all its imperfections so it would have been different if we stayed in the village; better or worse, we shall never know.
Weekly Santha or Market

By Manya and Aiyana

Once a week, on friday, tribals from all over the region gather with their goods to the ‘santha’ or market.

The market we visited was one of the largest in Araku valley. Very early in the morning, they make their way to the market area and set up their stalls so that as soon as the sun dawns’ they can start selling. Until noon, theysell, before making their way back to their village before darkness falls.

It’s located on some sort of a plateau. Kind of barren as hardly any trees grew there, making the scorching rays even worse. But now and again, a cool breeze would blow. To help cool the body there were many drinks such as fermented buffalo curd and palm juice. There was a row of women selling the alcoholic palm sap. And a man selling, the cold curd in a cone of a large leaf.

There were 2 big stores, the Girijan Cooperative Society, which bought all the forest products from the high hills and vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage, cherry tomatoes. And another one buying millets. At the entrance there were sacks with a huge variety of millets and grains in different shapes and hues.

Other products that were being sold included ones from outside the region such as kitchen utensils, farm tools, toys, clothes, etc. Many animals like goats, roosters/chickens, a herd of buffaloes were being sold. There were palm baskets. There was an especially large quantity of tobacco and many other interesting forest harvests.

There was so much to take in and experience. Some didn’t adapt to the weather and didn’t feel well from all the travelling so couldn’t enjoy the market as much. But the wonderful aura impacted everyone.
At a distance of 7 kms from Borra cave is a hamlet/village called Katki. The Katki villagers belong to the Nookadora tribal group.

On our visit to the Katki village we learned more about the livelihood in general, and their daily routine: the men begin their day having a large bowl of gruel (a porridge made of millet) before setting off to work in the forest or fields at the crack of dawn; the women prepare meals, pack it and join the men in fields by 8; they have their meal at the field; if they have more work they reach home by dusk. If not they come back to their village earlier and rest.

They practice shifting cultivation. They cultivate four varieties of millets and rice, and vegetables and pulses. We were served lunch by them. However, they did not serve us the rice cultivated by them as they assumed that we would prefer the ‘white polished’ rice from the stores.

The food we ate was typical hilly foods – spicy, simple and delicious to most of us. We had rajma, rice, sambar and chicken cooked in bamboo! This was new and peculiar to most of us as we had not seen chicken being cooked in this manner. The taste was rich and juicy, perfectly cooked with the remnants of the bamboo adding to the taste, dialing down the spice, but not completely. As we were so interested in this we went ahead and got the recipe.

This is an overview of it: Pieces of chicken is marinated with a variety of spices to be then stuffed into a hollow bamboo. Sealed by a leaf that they often use to eat from. Once sealed they put it on the fire to be cooked. No oil is used and it’s the bamboo juices that helps it cook.

Later on while traveling through the night streets of Araku we noticed that this bamboo chicken is quite popular as there was tons of stalls on the side of the roads selling these.

-Aanya and Kavya
Village
One of the things they started mining was Bauxite (a metal ore from which you get aluminum). The industry uses a lot of this metal for kitchen utensils, power lines, airplanes, weapons (consumers use it for guns due to its lightweight properties), etc. These are things that are considered very important by the outside world.

Bauxite mining has been extremely profitable since aluminum is very valuable to the industry. Aluminum is worth a lot of money, so there were a lot of big companies mining Bauxite, which in turn was terrible for the people living there because their whole livelihood depends on agriculture. So the fact that there land was getting dug up was very damaging for their survival.

Adivasis held title deeds stating they owned the land and that it cannot be disturbed by outsiders unless they let them, but people in Katki village soon learned that they had no way to protect their land even with their documents.

Their relatives in other villages did not hold these documents and had become easy targets for the mining industry. The people in Katki village heard about Samata and decided to approach Samata for help.

Samata took this case to the court and after a long time, won and managed to stop most of the large-scale mining happening around the Borra caves. After hearing the village head’s story, we asked him about his opinion on mining, whether he thought it was ok if the adivasis do it on a small scale. We were quite surprised when he said that he disagreed with the whole idea of mining, on any scale. That was only his point of view, some of the youth would still like to mine for personal profit.

The Borra caves was soon turned into a tourist spot, and as per Samata judgement, 20 percent of the profit from the Borra caves every year was supposed to go to the local panchayat which is basically made up of the tribals, but since 1972 they have received the money only twice from the govt.
Katiki Falls

A short trek is required to get to the Katiki Falls, which originates from River Gosthani that flows 90 kilometers from Visakhapatnam. The waterfall is located near the Borra Caves and is a popular spot for picnickers and nature lovers.

There are several food kiosks on the way that serve snacks and beverages especially boiled corn, bamboo chicken and fresh coconut water which are run by the Katiki village adivasis. This helps them generate additional income.
Excerpts from the information board at Borra Caves is reproduced here:

‘The Borra Caves, also called Borra Guhalu, are million year old limestone caves. They are the largest caves in India at an elevation of about 705 mtrs. a.s.l. The caves are spread across an area of two sq km. A railway line runs over it.

They came into existence as a result of the flow of Gosthani river on the limestone deposits in the area. Water percolating from the roof of the caves dissolve limestone and trickle drop by drop to form stalactites at the roof of the cave and then dripping down to the ground to form stalagmites. These deposits have developed into interesting forms and structures inside the caves.

Borra caves was discovered in 1807 by William King George of the Geological Survey of India. But there are several legends, on its origin and discovery. The popular legend is that a cow, grazing on the top of the caves, fell through a hole, borra, on the ground and thus the name ‘Borra Caves’. ‘

Borra caves is a popular tourist destination. The dark moist caves are a welcome habitation for fruit bats and we saw loads of them. There is a little temple placed on high rock that can be reached through a narrow metal stairs.

While some have given religious interpretations to the formations in the caves they do not fail to capture the imagination of tourists and poets!
BORRA CAVES

Beneath shimmering shadows
Uplifted faces frown
The beauty of the ages
Slowly tramples down
Etched in the marks
Of the sacred rocks
Angels’ wings trying to protect
Against the human flocks

But as fingertips skim the stone
Can’t help but feel
The strands of ancient magic
Woven, a forgotten contract seal
Expectant hands receiving nothing
Robbed off humility and pride
A rustling amidst their roots
And whispers of legends that have died

The fury of sacrilege lingers
Frozen amidst memories
Souls that remember
The twinkle in their galaxies
Stories flowing in their blood
From clouds of hope
A reality could emerge
Woven by an invisible rope

-Aiyana and Manya
Housing

The Nooka Doras mostly live in mud houses with thatched or tiled roof in small hamlets. Houses have a single room extended in front side for a veranda supported by wooden beams, rafters and poles. While on the other three sides, the roof projects out to protect the mud walls from rain. The hearth is in the open area outside the house. There is another hearth either in the veranda or inside the house for cooking during rainy season. They sleep inside the house during winter season while in summer they sleep on the veranda or in open area, outside the house.
The bright green and red plastered mud walls are especially unique to this region. These are natural colors coming from the mineral soils of the region.

Dress and Ornaments

-Aanya and Kavya

The men dress in shirts and pants/lungis while the younger boys wore t-shirts and shorts.

The women wore saris but they tied them in two different ways one with a knot on the shoulder which is their traditional way of tying the saris. Many of the younger women also tied the saris the way you would commonly see in south India. We did see few of the younger girls wearing salwar kameez and little girls wore pavadai chattais. Traditionally the women from the Nukadora tribe wore three nose rings but we only saw one very old women wearing that. Again, it seemed like the younger generations have modernized and only wear one. Most wear nose rings but here and there you find some studs.

The way of tying a sari and the amount of piercing you have, vary from region to region. The younger generations don’t really practice the traditional way anymore.
Dhimsa is a dance performed by tribal people located in the eastern parts of Andhra Pradesh, and in some tribal regions of Orissa. This dance is usually performed on important occasions such as weddings, anniversaries, hunting festivals and yearly celebrations in the honour of their local deity. The performers dance to an orchestra dominated by drum beats. The music and the instruments are exclusively played by the menfolk while the dance is performed by womenfolk.

When we went there we were hoping we could see the Dhimsa but since there were no special occasions there was a very slim chance we would be able to. We also couldn't ask them to perform, since Araku valley became a tourist spot a lot of tourists have started wanting to see the Dhimsa which is why nowadays to watch them you have to pay. We thought we wouldn't be able to see it but then we heard that, lucky for us that day there was a performance in the Araku valley tribal museum.

It was so beautiful there were about fifteen to twenty women, they were all wearing bright green sarees, the colour of a parrot with a few gold sequins on them, these sarees worn in traditional style was knotted over their left shoulder. Their hair was tied up in buns to the side with flowers around them and they wore gold nose rings, chains and earrings.

The dance started with the women all holding hands in a line, the woman in the beginning guided the others. She also had a bunch of peacock feathers in her hand while the men played the drums, eventually they let go of each other's hands and formed a circle. They changed the sequence every time the rhythm of the drum changed. We got to join them and follow the steps as well. It was quite difficult, they move in a circle while dancing and they do it so fast every time you think you got the sequence the rhythm of drums changes and so does the sequence. I found it very tiring and I had hardly begun dancing but these women had been dancing for hours and they still seemed less tired than most of us. Though it was tiring it was a great experience.
Our Team
“The trip on a overall was a great experience and I thank Ms. Tanuja, our anthropology teacher for the great opportunity as well as teaching us so much about people and their cultures. Also thank you to all of the other teachers and people who made this trip possible for us.”

-Aanya

“It saddened me to see tribals starting to ‘modernise’. It made me angry that others tried to show them there’s a better way of living and dressing than the way they do. Telling them that their life is something poor compared to living in a city with having lots of money as one’s goal. But it gives me hope to see that there are many who fight for their land, their rights, their culture. Because really I think they are fighting for the wind, rain, sky… the land’s wellbeing. Learning and seeing their way of life, their songs, their dances… The whole trip was an unforgettable experience. “

-Aiyana

“We each came back different from when we left, in a hundred inexplicable ways. We came back knotted together more firmly than ever, whether we liked it or not. Bittersweet in my memory, like the rainbow in the middle of every raindrop. “

-Manya