

# Restoration of Dignity and Human Rights of Indigenous Tribal Community in Karnataka, India

## Organisation implementing the project

[ActionAid India](#) is part of the global federation of ActionAid International, which has operations in 40 countries worldwide. It began working in India in 1972, and in 2006 became registered as an Indian organisation called ActionAid Association.

The headquarters are in New Delhi, with 12 regional offices and two field offices. There are 162 staff members.

ActionAid Association collaborates with over 300 partner non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as other local grassroots and community-based groups.

They support 83 long-term projects in India, which work closely with particular communities for between one and 10 years, and 420 short-term projects of up to one year.

Their areas of work include: use of natural resources; democracy and governance; women's and girls' rights; children's rights; promoting peace, justice and secularism; and solidarity beyond boundaries.

## Project Description

This project has supported the Koraga tribe to access their basic rights, including land, housing, nutrition and education. It began as a short-term initiative in 2000 but was then expanded to become a long-term rights-based project in 2003.

The initiative started with Koraga communities in Udipi and Dakshina Kannada districts and was subsequently extended to Uttara Kannada and the Western Ghats mountainous area covering Kodagu, Mysore, Chikmagalur, Chamarajnagar, Shimoga and Hassan districts in Karnataka state, south-west India.

In relation to land and housing rights, the project has achieved:

- 117 acres of land in the Udipi district allotted to the Koraga tribe in 2003;
- 2,527 families given 2,850 acres of land under the Forest Rights Act;
- approximately 10,000 Koragas and 9,000 people from forest-dwelling communities accessed state-sponsored housing (on average they received a \$2,529 USD government grant to cover self-build construction cost); and
- 120 families reclaimed 271 acres of land in a national park area.

---

The main activities carried out by the project are:

- capacity building through training and awareness-raising on rights and entitlements, and increasing understanding of laws which protect against caste-based violation of rights - for example, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989;
- campaigns for land entitlement and nutritional support with local administration, and over 100 meetings with various government departments including social welfare, tribal affairs and finance;
- formation of women's self-help groups for sustainable livelihoods and leadership building;
- facilitating registration of the Koraga Federation (an organisation formed of members of the community and located in Udupi);
- research on declining nutrition trends among the Koraga community, used for evidence-based advocacy; and
- facilitating people-led advocacy to locally-elected members and Members of Parliament for a free nutrition programme.

Some components of the project have been completed; however, its advocacy initiatives are ongoing. They now work with 10 tribal communities who are affected by the caste system (Koraga, Malekudiya, Jenukuruba, Yerava, Bettakuruba, Soliga, Hasalaru, Siddi, Dongri, and Hakkipikki).

### **Aims and Objectives**

The main purpose of the project is to increase awareness of rights and entitlements of the Koraga people and other tribal communities, so that they claim access to land and housing. It was designed around the understanding that economic and social empowerment would reverse the generational injustices and stigma faced by the community.

The Koraga tribe has faced historical discrimination and violation of human rights under the oppressive caste-based system. This model of social stratification has subjected tribal communities to psychological, physical, sexual and economic violence, which further contributes to their vulnerabilities and marginalisation. One practice which the Koraga tribe are subjected to is known as 'Ajalu', where members of the community are made to eat leftover food from upper caste households mixed with hair, fingernails and other inedible substances - the belief is that the misfortunes of the upper castes are transferred to those who eat it. Despite legislation in place to prohibit it, this practice still takes place.

This project takes a rights-based approach to supporting the Koragas to stand up against such practices and the caste-system. It recognises that changes at the foundational level require extended engagement with communities and works to empower people as equal stakeholders in the fight against their marginalisation and deprivation.

---

---

**Context**

The Koragas are classed as 'untouchable' (the practice of branding an individual, group or community as impure) and have been subjected to systemic and historical caste-based oppression and exclusion. When ActionAid began working with the Koraga tribe they had been classified by the government as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

This classification entitles the community to certain government-sponsored schemes. However, a lack of awareness of their rights and the internalised inferiority felt by the group meant that they were not accessing these entitlements. This led to people being expelled from their land, high levels of malnutrition and few livelihood opportunities - they were continually dependent on the caste structures which oppressed them. This also contributed to the continued practice of Ajalu, as people were forced to accept the leftover food as their only means of nutrition.

---

**Key Features**

In 2000, ActionAid started working with young people in the Koraga tribe, focusing on their basic rights. To achieve dignity for the community they agreed to concentrate on: the right to livelihood including land and housing; the right to education; the right to health; and the right to dignity - with gender equality as a central component.

ActionAid works on the principle of localisation and partners with NGOs and local groups who have on-the-ground knowledge of the region. This project is community-led, meaning people from the communities are central to their work - with emphasis on leadership and participation in decision-making, and designing and implementing programmes. They have specifically focused on the inclusion of women and young people in leadership roles - most leadership roles are now held by women, therefore challenging patriarchy.

Adopting local strategies - through research, community mobilisation and engaging with local to state administration - has been a key factor in challenging historic marginalisation. This has proven to be the best way to address specific issues faced by the community by highlighting their struggles and allowing for greater independence. Through long-term partnerships with local groups, they also help increase their capacity to continue their work into the future.

The causes of the vulnerability of the Koragas and other tribes are complex. ActionAid recognises the need for wider engagement at multiple levels, to advance and promote people's actions for claiming their rights and securing progressive social change. This has included promoting a critical yet constructive dialogue with the State, and has taken the form of policy advocacy, research publications and campaigns to highlight the challenges of the community.

There are two government-sponsored rural housing programmes available to residents of Karnataka, one through central government and one state government. Residents receive a grant and construct their own home with technical assistance from government agencies. The materials used are decided by the owner - most choose modern houses with concrete slab roofing, and some choose traditional tiled roof houses. Families that live close to - or in - resource rich forest areas construct a canopy - using local materials - in the back-yard as an additional space for cooking, and in the front-yard for socialising and processing of forest produce.

---

ActionAid's work with the Koraga tribe has successfully influenced the State to provide land, allocated in the same villages where they were already living. For example, if a family was living in the forest then housing support would be given to build a house in-situ. Houses have been given under the PVTG's fund and Tribal Sub Plans (a concept used to direct support from central government to tribal populations within states). In some cases, where land is not owned by the resident, the government provides both land and housing. The allocation of funds for housing under the TSP has been significantly increased by the Government of Karnataka, due to demand from the community. The movement was led by the community, who were involved in identifying the land and constructing the homes.

ActionAid takes a secular approach to their work and have focused on valuing and incorporating tribal identity and culture. In 2014, they worked with the NGO Samagra Grameena Ashram (SGA) to create an alliance of different tribal Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), with a total of 10 CBOs formed and led by members of the 10 communities. This alliance, called Karnataka Aranya Mula Budakattugala Okkoota (or KAVANA Okkoota)<sup>1</sup>, meets four times a year to share learnings and challenges. It is an opportunity to collectively plan their future course of action, as well as build a stronger voice for impactful advocacy. Their current campaign, the Karnataka Adivasigala Nyayakagi Andolana (KAVANA)<sup>2</sup> - for the right to identity, dignity, forest, water, habitat and land - has successfully advocated for a government-sponsored nutrition programme entitling the 10 tribal communities to free food products during the six months of monsoon season.

ActionAid has also worked in partnership with excluded communities, mass movements, academics, educational institutions, media, and civil society organisations, with the aim of widening their scope to reach communities beyond their direct interventions.

---

## Funding

As part of a global federation, ActionAid India's funds are raised from various countries internationally. The total cost of the project has been approximately \$633,000 USD, with an annual budget of approximately \$38,000 USD.

The project is focussed on building the capacity of marginalised tribes to access services they are entitled to from the government - ActionAid uses the term 'ethical resources' to describe funds generated in this way and the value of services received. For example, this includes housing grants, pension entitlements, nutrition and food security schemes, land, agricultural support and education. ActionAid has generated over \$5 million USD in ethical resources.

---

<sup>1</sup> KAVANA means 'poetry' in Kannada - the language spoken predominantly in Karnataka state - and is used as a term to illustrate the struggles of indigenous people. Okkoota means 'union'.

<sup>2</sup> Andolana means 'struggle', 'resistance' and 'protest' interchangeably.

---

## **Innovation**

ActionAid believes that lack of education and access to a dignified livelihood is the root of the problem for tribal groups, as people don't know how, or are unable, to stand up against practices of the caste system. The approach of this project is based on the belief that providing services for the most excluded people leads to empowerment. It relies on strong partnerships with the communities themselves and CBOs who have the best knowledge of the struggles faced. It takes a strong rights-based approach, enabling communities to develop their own leadership, to assert and demand their rights.

The project has helped break the cycle of historical marginalisation faced by the Koragas and other tribal groups, through educating people on their rights and entitlements and supporting them to claim those rights. This is transforming the lives of the Koraga people for generations to come, as this awareness is passed on - with more and more people refusing to conform to the practices imposed upon them.

---

## **Environmental Impact**

Ecological justice and resilience are integrated in ActionAid's approach - all interventions have a neutral or positive impact on the environment.

ActionAid India's current country strategy includes the way that ecological and social justice complement each other, and therefore recognises the importance of community-led protection of the environment. Government policy allows residents complete freedom in the design of their house, in order to meet their needs and preferences. Some houses are constructed using mud blocks and bamboo roofing with thatch layering. Houses in forest areas are generally made of local materials (wooden frame and beams) with clay-tiled or iron-sheet roofs. These houses stay cool, emit less heat, and are not energy-intensive to construct.

The Koraga community practices a subsistence economy, reliant on natural resources only for basic needs through hunting, gathering and growing food. They harvest only non-timber products to support their livelihoods, which do not destroy the forest.

---

## **Financial Sustainability**

The impacts of the project are ongoing - by breaking the cycle of caste-based oppression and increasing awareness of rights, future generations will continue to benefit beyond the project implementation period.

The project has supported over 1,000 women to become self-sufficient through a livelihood programme of jasmine plantations - earning between 50,000 and 100,000 Indian Rupees per year (\$716 - 1,432 USD). With guaranteed access to the forest, the community can now gather the resources to cover their basic needs. The land claimed is also used for subsistence agriculture (growing only the food required for themselves and their families).

Future costs for expansion of the project will be covered by ActionAid under its continuing long-term commitment to working with tribal communities in the area.

---

## Social Impact

The main focus of ActionAid's rights-based work is to build awareness and the ability of indigenous tribal people to access government schemes they are entitled to. There was historically low uptake of these schemes and they were misused by the administration - including diversion of funds from the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) in the state of Karnataka until 2014. Between 2012 and 2014, ActionAid supported a movement to improve the services delivered through the TSP, which resulted in legislation preventing the diversion of funds from the TSP to non-tribal welfare purposes.

The project has also improved nutrition and food security. In 2009, a health study by ActionAid showed high levels of anaemia amongst women and children, with four in every five (80%) Koraga women suffering endemic anaemia. With the support of SGA, a nutrition plan was drafted in Udupi and Dakshina Kannada districts, which led to a state-sponsored free nutrition programme for all 3,542 Koraga families. Working closely with SGA and the Koraga Federation, ActionAid began advocacy work to seek nutritional support for the wider Koraga community in 2011 - 200,000 people have since benefited from this. This includes 2,668 families who have gained access to 3,153 acres of land from the government for cultivation and food production. They now have complete access to the forest for collection of honey, gooseberries, medicinal plants and herbs, edible roots and bamboo sticks - this was granted following ongoing protests against restrictions imposed on them. The community organised themselves to gain access to these reserved forest areas through The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA).

ActionAid's advocacy work has also contributed to increased access to education of tribal communities including: 2,632 children enrolled in school; 2,875 Jenukuruba (a forest-dwelling tribe in Karnataka) children claimed a scholarship of approximately \$12,542 USD; 150 children enrolled in eleventh grade; 50 students enrolled in a Bachelor's Degree programme; and 20 students enrolled in a Master's Degree programme.

The project has led to greater participation of Koraga women in decision-making in their community, including participating in village development plans and facilitating access to basic services.

Due to increased awareness of rights, the Koraga people in ActionAid's intervention areas are now refusing to take part in practices such as Ajalu. They are accessing government schemes and increasing educational opportunities - with one local Koraga woman becoming a university lecturer. This shows the transformative impact of the project, by breaking the culture of silence.

Access to housing has positively contributed to building the confidence of historically marginalised communities, with people creating more opportunities for themselves. Many now participate in local governance - working in the local area and with the government. Members of forest-dwelling communities have pursued government jobs in the forest department - as they show passion in protecting the forest whilst being sensitive to the rights of their own communities. This shows a transition from indigenous people being guarded, to becoming forest guards themselves. Further displacement of forest dwelling communities is prevented through legalising land rights.

## Barriers

The campaign for the nutrition programme was considered urgent due to a decline in the Koraga population and initially the community held meetings outside district government offices to highlight their concerns. However, this did not work and they decided it was necessary to change their strategy. By adopting an evidence-based approach instead, through research into poor health, they strengthened their campaign for a free nutrition programme. The initiative faced further barriers when, due to political instability, no decision on implementing the plan could be made. Despite setbacks, the campaign continued to gain momentum, with community members sending postcards to officials demanding implementation of the programme. Fifty-thousand postcards were received and unable to ignore growing pressure, the government announced that free nutritional support would be given.

An ongoing challenge has been maintaining motivation of the community despite slow progress and a decades-long struggle.<sup>3</sup>

## Lessons learned

ActionAid have moved from an 'NGO-centred', to a 'people-centred' approach. Instead of promoting singular leadership, they instead support communities to organise into collectives at village level, with federations at panchayat (a village self-government council), block (a district sub-division) and district levels. This leads to district-level alliances which have progressed to a state-level committee. This has been an organic process - of mobilisation, promoting local leadership and political awareness.

Lessons learnt include:

- community engagement from the start helps to build long-term ownership of a project. Working with specific groups such as children and women helps to develop leadership at different levels;
- engaging with local governments and elected representatives at different levels - for example, panchayats - helps to strengthen advocacy. Development planning happens mainly at the local level of governance, whilst implementation of policies comes from sub-national and national level governments;
- people-led advocacy backed up by evidence and data draws the attention of public authorities;
- change takes time - this requires long-term engagement and investment in an area;
- an integrated approach is needed to enable overall development and well-being of communities;
- there is strength in numbers - developing alliances amongst different tribal communities has increased pressure on the state;
- different indigenous groups understand democracy differently and are driven by their own cultural norms. In order to come together as a collective, they needed to create and promote a spirit of democracy which was secular with agreed principles;
- challenging patriarchy was possible through women's leadership development, and through discussing these issues with men, women and children - this has led to indigenous women being at the forefront of the KAVANA campaign; and
- promoting community-based organisations has given communities a sense of ownership, participation and collaboration - this is essential to ensure sustainability of the project.

---

<sup>3</sup> More information can be found [here](#) on the challenges encountered and individual case studies.

## Evaluation

There has been no formal or technical evaluation - these are not generally carried out by ActionAid unless required as a condition from donor organisations.

For rights-based projects, ActionAid believes that qualitative monitoring can only be done through continuous reviews and reflections from stakeholders, academics, women's rights activists, social activists and members of ActionAid. This enriches the quality of the project and strengthens the communities' ownership of the process - it also allows ActionAid to develop their own understanding and engagement.

Their [Critical Stories of Change](#) report documents case studies from the project, and was part of an intensive reflection process of the first ten years. This happened when their work with the Koraga community had reached its peak and they were exploring the idea of transferring the approach to other indigenous communities, when the KAVANA alliance was formed.

Annual review and reflection processes are carried out with participation of the community and its leaders - this acts as an ongoing regular evaluation process. It also allows the community themselves to take part in evaluating the impact it has had on their lives.

## Recognition

The project has featured in [Women's eNews](#), [National Herald](#) and [The Pioneer](#).

## Transfer

The project began in two districts with the Koraga tribe - it has now expanded to 10 forest dwelling tribes. Its work has also expanded to districts in the Western Ghats mountainous region of Karnataka.

The approach is gaining momentum as tribal communities continue to be successful in claiming their rights. They are accessing grants to construct houses which are more environmentally friendly and representative of their tribal identity and culture.

ActionAid's ongoing campaigns include state-level quality education for tribal people, complete implementation of the FRA, and an extension of the nutrition programme to include Dongre and Irulas communities.

Future expansion plans include advocacy initiatives for land and housing entitlements for people freed from forced labour. This has already been initiated in the coffee estates of Kodagu district, to support people from tribal groups to reject the bonded-labour system they are forced into.

The project can be replicated, and recognition of this work would help further establish the replicability of this human rights-based approach. Rather than creating dependencies, it focuses on capacity building so that the benefits are long-term - by transferring knowledge to local partners and community members this ensures sustainability. This, along with access to existing government systems, supports the transfer of their work to other areas. By engaging with panchayats, block officials, local health workers, and early childhood and education workers, and participating in school management committees, this also facilitates transfer and continuity of their work.

