



DHAATRI

2023

FOREST SAGE

A tribal tale



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Thanks to the Adivasi Women of Chatra, Jharkhand
Nirmala Kerketta, Chatra
Monica, Chatra

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ABOUT DHAATRI

Dhaatri Trust works on the intersections of gender and environment justice. We work closely with indigenous/ adivasi and rural women in India to strengthen their collective voices and rights to forests and natural resources. We promote their indigenous knowledge practices and sustainable ways of living with nature which provide valuable insights in the present global politics of climate crisis. These stories from the ground are a tribute to the invisible practitioners of nature based knowledge.

Nestled amidst the heart of the semi-dry deciduous forests of Jharkhand is a small village called Sangri, a quiet place situated in the Chatra district.

Houses in the village are designed in traditional style, made of thatched roof and mud bricks.



Mrs. Nirmala Kerketta, a tribal woman belonging to the Munda tribe lives here with her family and community.

Nirmala is a kind-hearted and respectful woman. Her presence exudes an amalgamation of humility, strength, and warmth to all who crosses her path. Her life is a distinctive tale which can be understood as a tapestry intertwined with the threads of activism, advocacy and an enduring inseparable bond with the mother nature.



Her profound connection with the rhythms of the forest runs deep, her knowledge truly reflects a deep understanding of the ecosystem which she calls her home.



Nirmala's activism is closely intertwined with her forest upbringing. The rich knowledge of flora and fauna is a blessing which has been passed down by her forefathers whose harmonious coexistence with the forest land, their lives dedicated to understand, nurture, protect, and recognize their vital role in the larger natural order. This wisdom became the foundation of her life and value system.

The essence of this ancestral wisdom about forestry is deeply ingrained in the philosophy, cultural practices and traditions of her tribe which are reflected and expressed through folklores, festivals, rituals, songs, dance, art and craft and lifestyle.



The understanding of the forest has gone beyond mere identification and naming species. She has grasped the delicate balance of the ecosystem, knowing how each existing plant and other living organisms play a crucial role. With just a glance at a plant's growth, she can evaluate the health and quality of the soil that supports it. She understands the practicality, medicinal benefits, and uses of various flora and fauna species from her forest, having awareness to the part of a plant that is helpful and what could harm. Her knowledge even extends to sustainable utilization practices.

Nirmala's expertise isn't theoretical, it is grounded in her experiences. For instance, she can easily differentiate birds' calling, interpret and decipher animal behaviour and so also understand why trees thrive in a specific habitat and environmental condition.

Take the Sakhua tree, for instance; it conceals a wide network of roots under the ground spread across in such a way that it can conserve moisture and hold water for longer period, which makes the area fertile, and also has the ability to attract rainfall. This tree is considered sacred and has cultural significance in Adivasi culture.

Nirmala's area of speciality is herbal studies, in addition to her knowledge of the forest. She is interested in harnessing nature's healing powers through food and herbal treatments.



She prepares Mahua and Ragi laddus for boosting energy and strength, oils for treating wounds and injuries, joint pain, and remedies for digestive ailments in the form of churnas. The list goes on....



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If you closely observe, you will notice that the elderly citizens of our community have the same strength and energy as they had when they were young. Even today my mother in law/ mother who is 100 years old, wakes up early in the morning at 4 AM; everyday follows the same routine, does all the chores of cleaning, bathing, washing by herself with the exact same energy.

She may not be able to speak properly, but her hearing power, sense of her surroundings and ability to understand the environment and other things is still strong.

This is because, in older times, people of our tribe were dependent entirely on natural resources, especially the sacred Mahua tree for everything. Mahua trees had provided them with food to eat in times of crisis when they couldn't afford to satisfy their basic needs. Yet, with time, it provided a source of income which became their only livelihood. Therefore, they grew up by having food made out of Mahua . For instance, for cooking meat, sabji, and rotis, Mahua oil extracted from the seeds was used in the cooking process. Mahua was the main ingredient in varieties of recipes.

Preservatives and chemicals are added in the present day food items which are highly harmful for the body. This is the biggest difference between our generation and older generation in terms of physical health.

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In our conversation with her, She told us how some wild plant species which are only grown in the jungle, such as 'Dhavai', held secrets that are beneficial to women's health.



Another tree, named 'Peshaar' in Adivasi language, produces a red-coloured ooze from its trunk, which is believed to hold tremendous power to cure diabetes and control sugar levels in a body.



Leafy greens such as 'Purnava saag' grows near water streams. Women of the community come early in the morning to pick and collect fresh saag leaves from the stream. The leafy portion has the ability to support and increase blood cells in the body.

Another Adivasi woman from Nirmala's group shares an experience with us...

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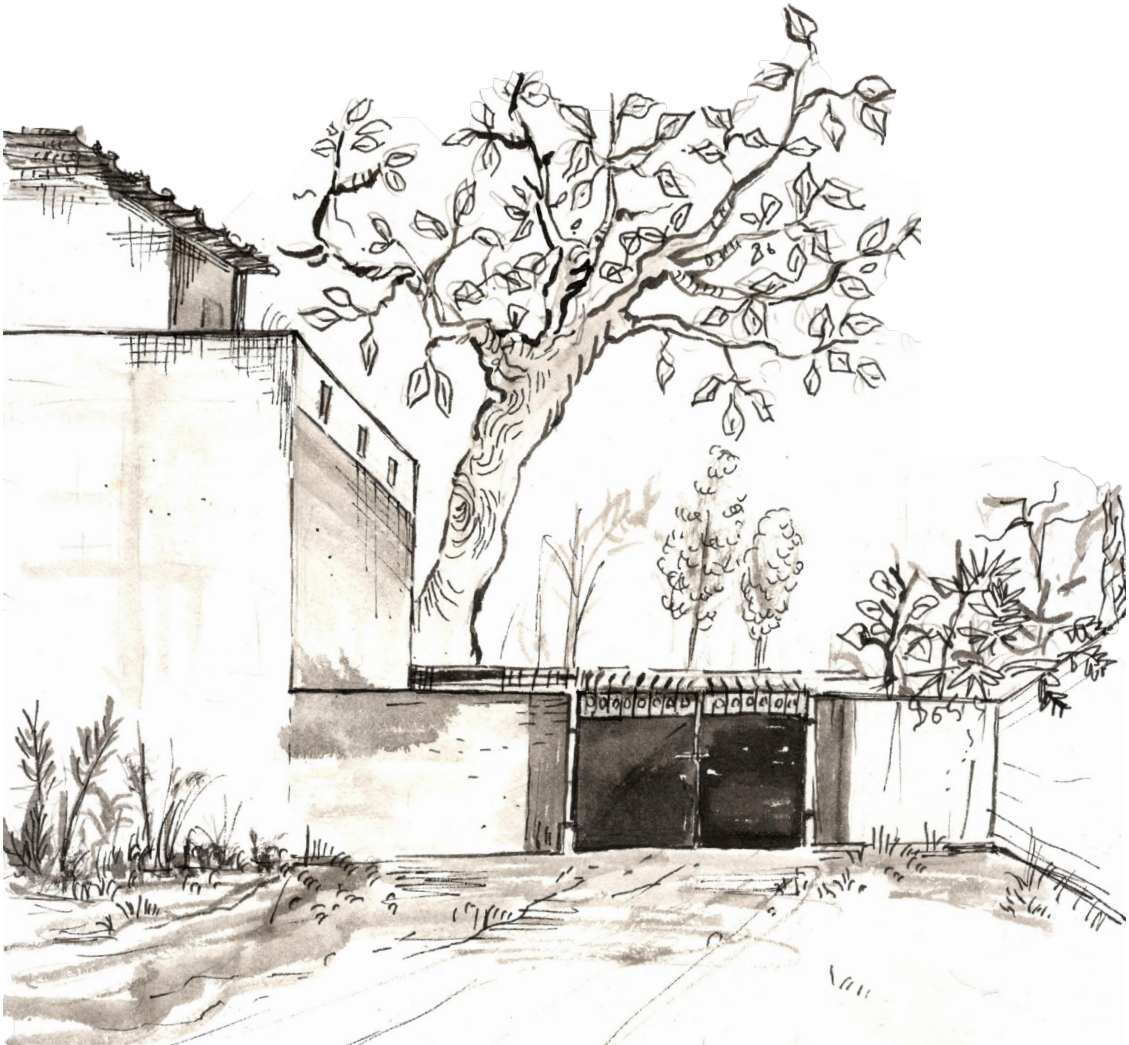
My daughter and niece were both cured by this saag. We decided to give my niece this saag every day for a month when she needed a blood transfusion as her blood group wasn't available and no one was ready to donate.

To the doctor's surprise, she recovered. With curiosity and amazement he asked, "What did you feed her?" because her blood count had increased considerably.

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In her modest corner of the world, her contribution is monumental. And through her unwavering dedication she, with her network of Adivasi women, plants seeds of awareness that is manifesting into real change. Nirmala's influence goes beyond the boundaries of her village. She advocates for tribal rights for women, brings awareness on the Forest Rights Act, and sheds light on mining and land concerns; she has become a voice for her community. Through her efforts, Nirmala hopes for a better future for women and children of her community and continues to impart her acquired wisdom to the younger generations in whichever way possible.





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