



## **Unnati 2015, Panna Tiger Reserve**

(A vocational training programme for Pardhi students)

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>UNNATI - THE PROGRAMME .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Vocational Training.....	6
Physical training.....	8
Volunteer interactions .....	9
Plantation delight.....	10
<b>BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAMME .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROGRAMME .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>THE WAY FORWARD .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>OUR VISION .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>OUR PARTICIPANTS.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>14</b>

## Introduction



Pic 1: The project Unnati gang!

*'Agar humare bachon ko aise suvidhaein prapt ho rahi hain, toh humein bahut khushi hogi. Sab pardhi ek joot hokar aise programme ko safal banane ki koshish karenge.'* – a Pardhi parent.

The Pardhis claim descent from the Rajputs. They're nomadic tribes and are mostly known to inhabit the forests of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and some parts of Karnataka. Their traditional occupation was that of hunting. Since the time of the Mughals, Pardhis have been hired to help in *shikar*/hunting, whether it was for sport for the British or for the *rasoi ghars* (kitchens) of the *zameendars*. While the Pardhis used to hunt only small game like wild boars, rabbit's etc., the pressure and demand for big cat skin and other body parts as well as the lack of any other opportunities for livelihood has made the Pardhis hunt tigers and leopards as well. It is for this reason, that the Pardhis are perceived as being one of the biggest threats to wildlife. Bahelias, Phase' Pardhi, Chita Pardhi are some of the sub-tribes of this community.



Pic 2: A Pardhi family at Gandhigram



Pic 3: A Pardhi settlement at Gandhigram

The criminal branding of this tribe goes back to 1871 after the British passed the "Criminal Tribes Act". They often had to deal with the stigma of disbelief and looked upon with

mistrust, especially since after they have been held responsible for the depleting tiger numbers. This view has in no manner been beneficial to the community in the long run. It has not only failed to address the existing problem at hand which is the dependency of the Pardhis on the forest and forest produce as a means of livelihood, but has also made them more aggressive and frustrated.

Unlike some of the other parts of Madhya Pradesh, the district of Panna has not yet provided the Pardhi community with the status of a Tribe, thus depriving them of their tribal rights and reservations (especially for applying for a job, competitive exams etc). Since they're nomads and do not have a house of their own, they move from one forest to another for livelihood purposes. Their children are therefore forced to tag along with them and are thus deprived of being educated.

However, the Panna Tiger Reserve management along with WWF India and Education Department (*Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan*) have taken special efforts to build and run a hostel for the children of the Pardhi community in order to ensure that they're not deprived of their basic right to education. Thus, the two hostels in Panna viz. the boys hostel in Narangibaug and the girls hostel in Kunjvan hosts students from this community across various age groups until Class VIII. Surprisingly, after Class VIII, these students are sent back to their parents and they're once again forced to travel with their parents as they lack a permanent home to live in from where they could continue their schooling.



Pic 4: The Pardhi girls' hostel at Kunjvan, Panna

This is where LWF decided to step-in and work with these students to provide them with basic skillset that would allow the students to start earning for themselves without being dependent on the forest produces. This would not only wean them away from the forests, but also aid conservation/protection of species and equip them with skills to join mainstream society and explore alternative professions.

LWF initiated project Unnati, a vocational training programme for the children of the Pardhi community, along with Panna Tiger Reserve at Panna.

## Unnati - the programme

With the help of necessary groundwork, a month prior to starting of the programme, the Last Wilderness team identified students from the girls hostel at Kunjvan as well as the boys hostel at Narangibaug studying in classes 5-8<sup>th</sup> who were keen and showed considerable interest in being trained in a particular vocation. The students not only voluntarily signed up for the programme, but also mentioned the trades they preferred learning.



Pic 5: In discussion with the community with regard to the importance of project Unnati

'Unnati' (which means progress) a vocational training programme for the children of the Pardhi community, was conducted by Last Wilderness Foundation from 1<sup>st</sup> May – 14<sup>th</sup> June 2015. The programme took on the responsibility of training 11 girls and 7 boys. While the girls were trained in a basic stitching and tailoring course, the boys were trained in basic electrician course.

## Vocational Training

LWF undertook the training of 7 boys in a basic electrician course, which included classroom sessions on, series lamp, different types of series lamps, switch connection, light connection, various tools used, insulation, RYGB, 20 w, 40 w, 80 w connections and types of wires. They were also trained in learning to build a circuit board & fitting of a doorbell and motor winding. The 11 girls were trained in the basics of stitching, which included classroom sessions on how to put a stitch, working of a sewing machine, stitching of buttons, stitching of petticoats, measurements, stitching of *salwar kurta* and finally stitching of blouses. All the participants were given certificates of completion of their respective courses in a felicitation ceremony graced by the Deputy Director, Panna Tiger Reserve, Shri Anupam Sahai.



Pic 6: Girls learning the art of stitching and tailoring



Pic 7: Let there be light! – the boys learning the art of bulb connections and domestic wiring



Pic 8: Felicitation ceremony graced by the Deputy Director, Panna Tiger Reserve, Shri. Anupam Sahai

## Physical training

Along with the vocational training, the participants (owing to their physical strength and great endurance/ stamina) were also encouraged to spend two hours on the field with regard to regular exercise and a sport of their choice.

While the boys (already State level *Kabaddi* players) chose to put their energy into *Kabaddi*, football, cricket, *pitthu* and volleyball (a new volleyball court was constructed for them as part of this programme) the girls were taught how to play *kabaddi* from the scratch (this is the first time the girls have undergone a formal training) along with *Kho-kho* (a traditional sport they were familiar with), various breathing exercises and a bit of meditation.



Pic 9: The students became adept *kabaddi* players by the end of the programme and also indulged in a bit of meditation





Pic 10: We were witness to an exciting girls v/s boys *kabaddi* match too!

## Volunteer interactions

In order to maximize awareness about the Pardhis, and for people from outside to get a sense of forest communities, LWF team invited people interested and eager to contribute to the cause of wildlife conservation by being a part of / volunteering for project Unnati. Needless to say that the volunteers played a very important role in the project as they interacted with the students with regard to wildlife conservation and its importance, undertook storytelling sessions with the students, spent time with the students and adults alike in order to understand the community better, introduced the students to various outdoor and board games, indulged the students in art /craft work, screened wildlife movies and even held workshops for the students with regard to hygiene and first aid. Both the volunteers and the students benefitted mutually through these interactions owing to both rural as well as urban perspectives and sharing of experiences. Volunteers on this project had come from various cities like Mumbai, Delhi & Hyderabad. This also helped the students to get an insight about their respective cities.



Pic 11: Workshops and interactive sessions were an important part of the programme

## Plantation delight

The Last Wilderness Foundation team along with Panna Tiger Reserve celebrated the World Environment Day on 5th June at Panna Tiger Reserve with the Pardhi students. Field Director, Panna Tiger Reserve, Shri R. Sreenivasa Murthy inaugurated the event by planting a sapling himself, followed by the students. Each student was given a sapling of a fruiting tree (Guava, Papaya, Ber, Neem) and was given responsibility for that plant.



## Benefits of the programme

- 1) The programme helped equip the students with skills, which can aid them in alternate professions/ source of livelihood.
- 2) Helped sensitize them towards the cause of wildlife conservation.
- 3) Helped the students in gaining perspectives and sharing of experiences due to interaction with different people from different regions of India.
- 4) It helped create awareness about the community.

- 5) Helped in motivating the students, by encouraging them to take pride in themselves as well as their work.
- 6) Helped rope in the physical strength of the participants by channeling it into various sporting activities.
- 7) Helped encourage/inculcate a sense of discipline among the students, which is the basis for personality development.
- 8) Helped piqué the interest of not only the participants, but of the adults as well. Families of the participants became healthy supporters of the programme and lent their co-operation to a large extent.



Pic 12: The kids have a bright future if guided in the right direction

## Challenges faced during the programme

- 1) Low turnout - Since the students had left the hostel for summer vacation, we faced challenges in bringing back the students from their respective homes after convincing them and their parents in order to start the programme.
- 2) Parents were not inclined to send their children during vacation time since they want them to earn a living for the family. They feel they're at a loss if their child goes to the school as the school does not offer them any kind of a stipend. (Generally a child earns about Rs. 20,000-40,000 during the vacation period).
- 3) Students need constant motivation to stay in school.
- 4) Severe disciplinary issues, especially amongst girls, thereby ending up in constant monitoring.

5) Easy access to Gandhigram (a Pardhi settlement) especially for the boys thereby making it easy to go back to the settlement which happened quite a few times during the programme.

6) Currently the students staying in the hostel is dependent on the efforts taken by the *chowkidars* at both the hostels. The *chowkidars* who're also Pardhis are the people who meet the parents, motivate them to send their students, bring them from their parents' location to the hostel and ensure the safety of these students. However, on the flip side, if the *chowkidars* are not well-meaning people, then they can stop the entire show. Hence, the dependency factor on them is too high which can be a risk.

7) Education levels of the students need to improve. It was observed that students from Class VIII could not read Hindi words.

## The way forward

- Set up a committee at the state level (in M.P atleast) to work for the welfare of the Pardhi community. This committee would be responsible for an end-to-end monitoring of this community like their individual identity in the state, data collection, education, jobs, etc. *This is simply important because we're now looking at partly educated bunch of students who're likely to join the bandwagon of poaching (like their parents), if they're not guided to join the mainstream society.*
- Help in providing better/higher educational opportunities for the students in order for them to study further after they complete their mainstream schooling. Adopt the education of a student.
- Stay and interact with the students at Narangibaug and Kunjvan (exchange perspectives which will help the students grow and develop their personality), understand and provide based on the students' need.
- Provide vocational skills to the students which will help the students work towards an alternative source of livelihood
- Help place the students into suitable jobs in the city based on their acquired vocational skill. This will require handholding over a period of time till the student is confident/ comfortable in his/her surroundings
- Take on a subject to teach the students

## Our Vision

We're trying to help a bunch of students to take up jobs or settle in their own businesses. This would create role models for this community and will build trust amongst the younger students. This would help us take this initiative forward as these role models can then quote examples of their own lives to the younger students and their parents and guide them through their academic careers. This model needs to be multiplied through M.P. & Maharashtra so as to be able to cover most of the Pardhi population.

## Our participants

Girls –



1. Pushma Pardhi



2. Kosam Pardhi



3. Dishavarni Pardhi



4. Mushabari Pardhi



5. Priya Pardhi



6. Shafi Pardhi



7. Sijaran Pardhi



8. Soanpankhini Pardhi



9. Summaran Pardhi



10. Imarti Pardhi



11. Rasni Pardhi

## Boys -



1. Summar Pardhi



2. Vikrant Pardhi



3. Cheppe Thakur



4. Saidil Pardhi



5. Chaabi Kumar



6. Chepe Raja



7. Veergun Pardhi

## Conclusion

It is imperative to continue such programmes for the Pardhi students along with continuous interactions with people from different walks of life so that not only will they get various perspectives outside of their own circle but, continuous vocational training will help the students undergo training in various vocations in a manner that will equip them with skills thereby preparing them for alternative professions.