

Atmashakti to YOU

SHARED RESOURCES, GROUND KNOWLEDGE

Listening to Rural India: Voices, Realities, and the Road Ahead



Dear Co-traveller,

There are moments in development work when the act of listening becomes more powerful than the act of speaking. The Indigenous Yatra and the Grameen Charcha were two such moments—quietly unfolding across villages, yet carrying within

them the weight of lived realities, aspirations, and truths that rarely find space in formal discourse.

As the Yatra moved through landscapes and the Charchas gathered people in shared spaces, what emerged was not a single narrative, but a mosaic of voices. Farmers, youth, women, community leaders—each bringing their experiences, concerns, and ideas into the conversation. Together, these engagements reached **hundreds of villages across multiple states**, capturing **thousands of voices** that reflect the diversity and complexity of rural India.

One insight stood out with clarity: **Rural India is not silent—it is unheard.**

For too long, rural narratives have been interpreted through data points, policy summaries, or external assessments. But when communities speak for themselves, a different picture emerges—one that is nuanced, grounded, and often at odds with prevailing assumptions.

Several themes surfaced consistently across regions.

First, the gaps within systems.

Communities are not unaware of schemes or institutional structures. In many cases, they engage with them regularly. Yet, there exists a persistent disconnect—between policy design and ground realities, between access and usability, between intent and implementation. Whether it is agriculture, health, or livelihoods, the issue is less about absence and more about alignment.

Second, the aspirations of rural youth.

Contrary to popular belief, young people in villages are not looking to leave by default. They are looking for dignity,

opportunity, and relevance. They seek pathways that allow them to stay connected to their roots while engaging with a changing world. Skill, entrepreneurship, sports, and local innovation emerged as recurring themes in their vision for the future.

Third, the quiet but powerful rise of women's leadership.

Across discussions, women were not just participants—they were anchors of change. From managing households and farms to leading collectives and shaping decisions, their roles are expanding, often without formal recognition. What stands out is not just their contribution, but their perspective—grounded, inclusive, and deeply community-oriented.

And fourth, the enduring ecological wisdom embedded in rural life.

In an era of climate uncertainty, many communities continue to practice ways of living that are inherently sustainable. From cropping patterns and seed preservation to forest stewardship and water management, this knowledge is not theoretical—it is practiced, adapted, and transmitted across generations. Yet, it remains undervalued in mainstream frameworks.

Taken together, these insights point to a larger truth: development cannot be imposed; it must be co-created. And co-creation begins with listening—not as a one-time exercise, but as an ongoing commitment.

This edition of Stories from the Ground brings these voices closer to the center—not as anecdotes, but as evidence; not as stories of deficit, but as narratives of possibility.

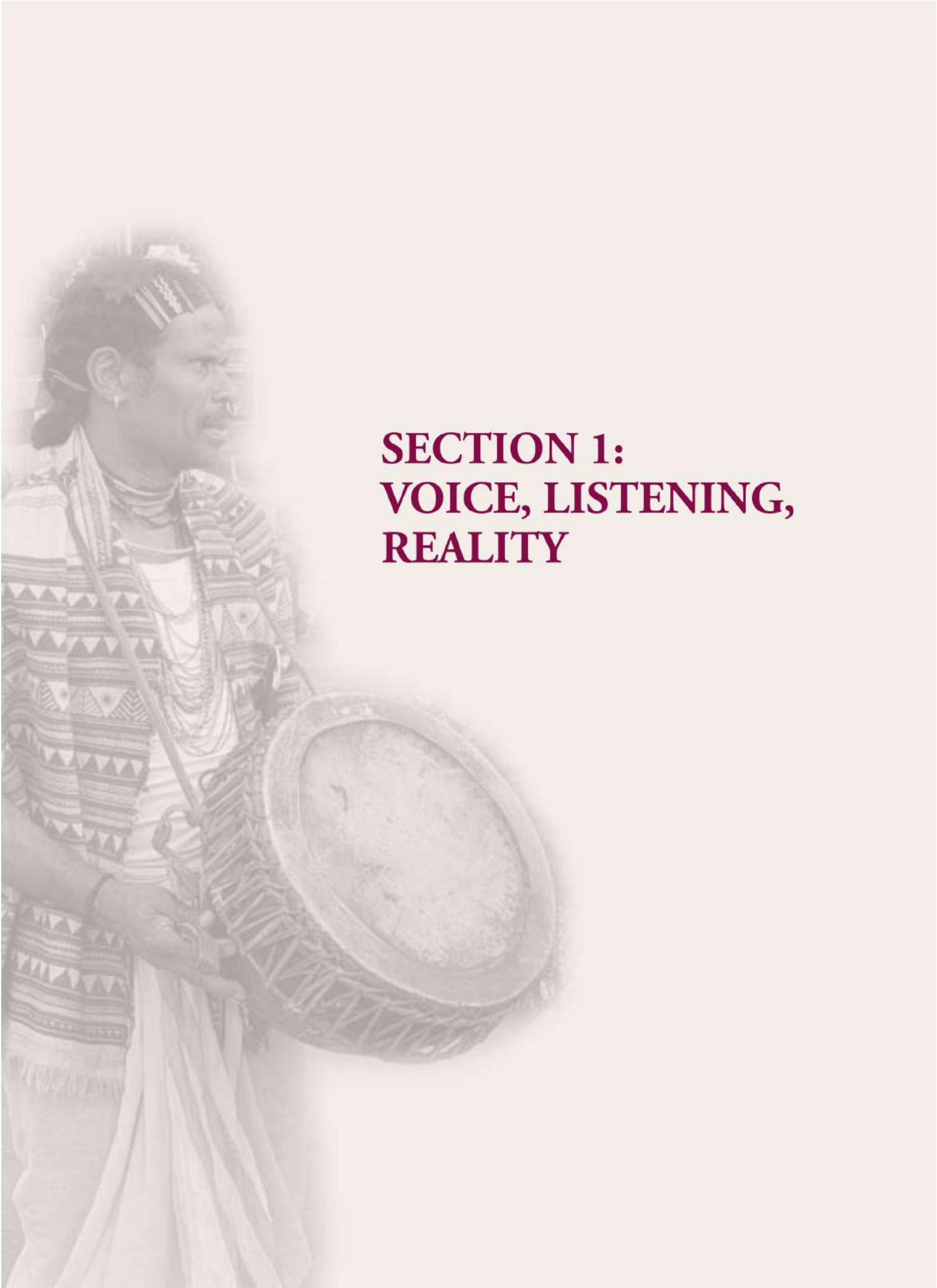
Ultimately, this story repository is not a document—it is a Listening Report, rooted in the spirit of “Gapa Hele Bhi Sata”—stories can be true.

With gratitude and hope,

Ruchi Kashyap

Ruchi Kashyap

On behalf of the Atmashakti Team



**SECTION 1:
VOICE, LISTENING,
REALITY**



A wisdom box at the center, inviting voices and stories to be heard

Listening to Rural India **What Thousands of Voices Reveal**

From seeds to stories, villages are already imagining change. What's missing is not effort, but alignment. Development begins where listening does.

The wooden box is placed under a tree at the centre of the village. People gather around it, curious. When it is opened, it reveals small pieces of the village itself, seeds wrapped in cloth, handwritten letters, dried herbs, and notes. It is called a Wisdom Box. But it begins to speak only when people do.

A letter is read aloud. Someone recognises a seed. Another adds a story. What starts as curiosity turns into a conversation.

A farmer speaks about his field lying empty after harvest. ***"We have land, but after paddy, it stays empty. We want to grow more, but we don't have seeds or water."***

A young person reflects quietly, ***"If there are opportunities here, we will stay. We don't want to leave our homes."***

These are not new concerns. What stands out is how rarely such conversations shape the plans meant to address them. Development often begins elsewhere through formats and targets with solutions that arrive already designed. Across villages, these

voices repeat in different forms, but with the same message. People are not short of ideas or effort. What they face is a gap between what they know, what they need, and what systems are able to support.

Listening at Scale

Over 26 days, across **7 states and 32 districts**, the Indigenous Yatra set out with a simple purpose to listen. It **reached 3,427 villages, engaged over 57,000 people, and documented more than 9,000 voices** through dialogues, storytelling, forest walks, food documentation, and cultural exchanges.

In Odisha alone, the campaign **covered 2,375 villages and engaged over 40,000 participants** through Gaon Chaupals, forest walks, letters from elders, and voice reports.

This was not a conventional exercise. People spoke in their own spaces, in their own ways. Women discussed seeds and food systems, elders shared ecological knowledge, and youth expressed aspirations through

conversations, drawings, and stories. These insights later converged at Grameen Charcha in Rayagada, where **more than 2,000 participants** gathered for dialogue and collective reflection.

What We Heard

Across geographies, four interconnected themes emerged.

1. Agriculture and Livelihoods

Agriculture remains central, but not always reliable. Many farmers spoke of single-crop dependence, lack of irrigation, and limited access to seeds and markets. Bidhan, a farmer from Rayagada described it simply, ***"The land is there, but we cannot use it fully."*** At the same time, traditional knowledge of mixed cropping and indigenous seeds continues to persist. ***"We still follow seasonal knowledge. We know what grows when,"*** shared Trinath, a participant, pointing to systems that are resilient but under-supported.

2. Youth and Migration

Migration is not just economic, it is emotional. Young people seek



A wisdom box at the center, inviting voices and stories to be heard

education, dignity, and income, but also belonging. ***“We want to study and earn, but we don't want to lose our connection with our village,”*** said Mohanlal, a youth participant from Chhattisgarh. Many expressed a willingness to stay if opportunities existed locally. Yet, in their absence, migration continues, taking with it not just labour, but knowledge and continuity.

3. Women's Participation

Women emerged as central to rural systems, as knowledge holders and practitioners. ***“In our homes, women keep the knowledge of seeds and food. We know what grows in each season and how to cook from the forest and our fields,”*** shared Shanti a participant from Jharkhand.

When given space, women spoke actively about livelihoods, forest access, and entrepreneurship. Their participation at Grameen Charcha reflected a shift from invisibility to leadership.

4. Forests and Ecology

For tribal communities, forests are not separate from life; they are food, health, and culture combined. ***“The forest gives us everything, food, medicine, and strength,”*** said an elder from Odisha. At the same time, communities spoke of declining access and limited involvement in

forest governance. This reveals a deeper tension of dependence without decision-making power.

Patterns that Emerged

These issues are deeply interconnected. Agriculture links to water, markets, and climate. Migration connects to livelihoods, education, and dignity. Forests intersect with food, culture, and governance. Across regions, a clear pattern emerges: community knowledge systems are strong, but institutional responses remain fragmented. Departments operate in silos. Information flows unevenly. Community voices are heard, but not consistently integrated into decision-making. The result is a persistent disconnect between lived realities and policy design.



An elder leads in rhythm as the community gathers in spirit

Why Listening Matters

This exercise reshapes how rural development is understood. It shows that communities are not passive recipients of schemes; they are already practicing solutions. They conserve bio-diversity, manage seeds, sustain food systems, and build local economies. What they need is not just new interventions, but alignment with what already exists.

Listening, therefore, becomes more than a method; it becomes a foundation for grounded, responsive policy. When thousands of voices are heard together, they do not just highlight challenges, they illuminate pathways for change.

From Listening to Action

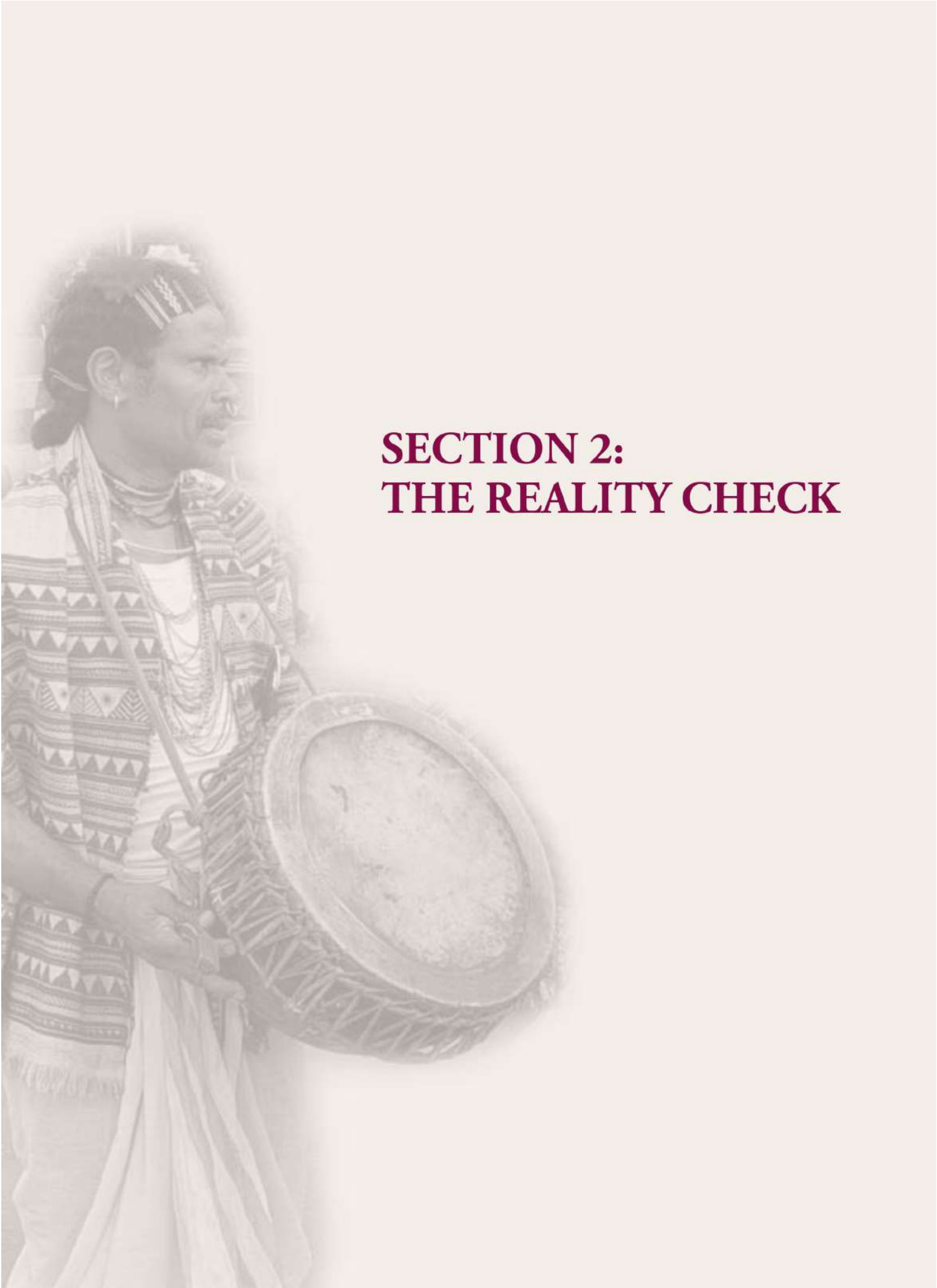
Grameen Charcha builds on this foundation by turning listening into action. Through workshops and dialogues, participants worked towards identifying priorities and shaping a People's Action Charter.

The approach encourages communities to lead where they can, while engaging with institutions for support. It brings together Samaj, Sarkar, and Bazaar into a shared framework.

This is where listening begins to influence systems. Because when rural voices are heard at scale, they do more than describe problems. They reveal connections, clarify priorities, and point to solutions already rooted in place.

And in doing so, they remind us of something fundamental.

Development does not begin with schemes or policies. **It begins with listening.** ■■■



**SECTION 2:
THE REALITY CHECK**



Youth are notably absent from a village meeting in Rayagada, Odisha

Why **Young India** is Leaving its Villages

A story from Malkangiri, Odisha where youth are forced to move

The Leaving

On most mornings in Tantaguda village, the day begins quietly. Mist lingers over the fields, and the hills of Malkangiri seem untouched by urgency. This is where 24-year-old Dhanapati Pangi grew up, learning the rhythms of the land, following seasons that once felt predictable. Farming was not just work; it was an inheritance.

But over time, the rhythm began to shift. The rains became unpredictable. Harvests became inconsistent. What the land offered was no longer enough, not for a family, and certainly not for a young man and his aspirations. There is a moment, often unspoken, when staying begins to feel less like belonging and more like being left behind.

For Dhanapati, that moment came in 2021. With a few friends and no clear plan, he left for Hyderabad...

A City That Takes More Than It Gives

The city did not simplify life. It made it harder, demanding long hours, constant adjustment, and a quiet resilience just to get through each day. Dhanapati found work in an e-commerce packaging unit. The early days were marked by uncertainty, as he struggled to find food, secure a place to stay, and understand unfamiliar systems. Wages were irregular, and illness made work even harder. With time, he found his footing. He learned packaging work, picked up basic marketing skills, and began navigating digital systems. Today, he earns around Rs. 15,000 a month.

He earns more than he could at home, but the city, despite its scale, offers little sense of belonging. Back in Tantaguda, his absence is seen in everyday life, with fewer hands to help, more work for others, and a home that feels just a little empty.

A Common Pattern in Tribal Landscapes

Dhanapati's journey is personal, but it reflects a wider reality. Across India, dropouts in Eklavya Model Residential Schools have risen sharply, from 111 in 2021–22 to 552 in 2024–25, raising concerns for tribal youth. In Odisha, more than one-third of tribal boys leave school at the secondary level,

according to the Odisha Economic Survey 2023–24.

In places like Malkangiri, farming depends on rain and small landholdings, so it supports families for only four to six months a year. For the remaining months, they look for other sources of income. Therefore, migration is not just a choice driven by dreams and aspirations, but it is shaped by gaps such as income, opportunity, and stability.

In village after village, the reasons repeat themselves. However, education has expanded, but not always in a way that connects to the local economies. A recent study



Village youth resting during a break from MNREGA work

shows that nearly 40 percent of rural educated youth struggle to find work that matches their skills. So, they leave. Not always out of choice, but because staying no longer feels viable.

The Quiet Push

In village after village, the reasons repeat themselves. Education has expanded, but not always in ways that connect to local economies. Young people complete school with expectations that their villages cannot meet. This uncertainty is reflected in broader trends, as the Economic Survey 2023–24 notes that despite rapid expansion in education, only 51.25% of India's youth are considered employable. So, the rural youth leave. Not always out of choice, but because staying no longer feels viable.

Between Two Worlds

Migration fragments life into parts. In the village, everything feels familiar, like the language, the people, and the comfort of being known. In the city, life often feels anonymous, with long hours, uncertain work, and little security. More than 80% of rural migrant workers are engaged in informal employment. For many, life feels divided between two worlds, without truly belonging to either.

What the Village Loses

Migration may not have immediate effects, but its impact lasts. As fewer young people remain, agriculture begins to decline. Traditional knowledge struggles to pass on. Community institutions weaken. Women, the elderly, and children take on more responsibility, managing farms and homes when working-age men are away. Over time, the energy that sustains village life begins to fade.

What Youth Really Want

Across conversations in villages, one thing becomes clear that the young people are not rejecting rural life but responding to its limitations. *“If there was work here, we would stay. We want to be with our families, to live in our own homes, and build our lives here. We don't want to leave everything behind just to survive. We want opportunities here, where we belong. We are not asking for much, we just want dignity, not dependence,”* said Ram Chalan, a tribal youth from Sandural village in Khairput block of Malkangiri.

In a discussion during Grameen Charcha in BissamCuttack, most of the youth say they would prefer to

remain in their villages, if stable livelihoods were available. Even Dhanapati, after adapting to city life, remains certain: *“If I could earn Rs.15,000–20,000 in my village, I would stay.”*

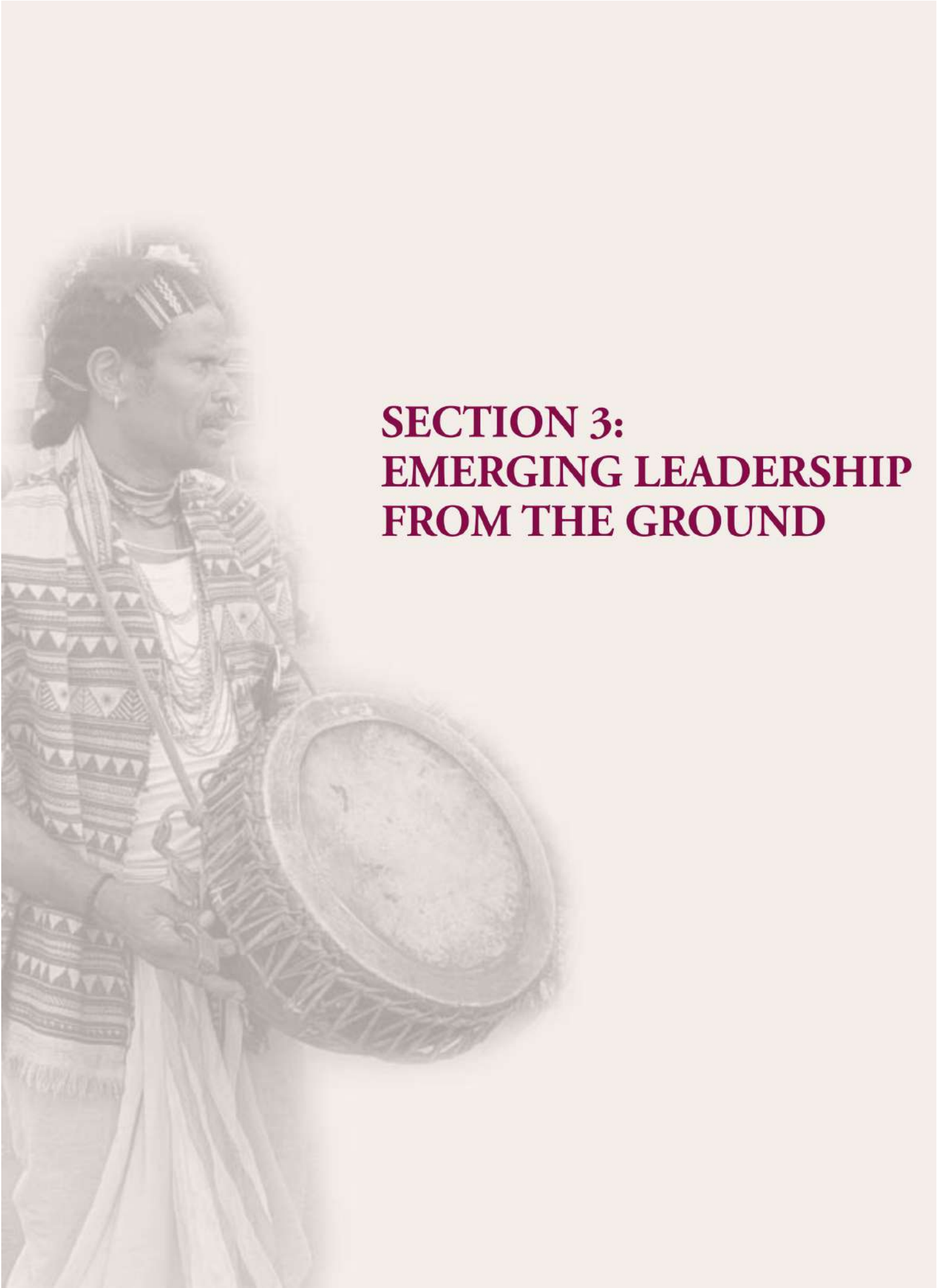
The Unanswered Question

For now, he continues in Hyderabad, working, saving, and adjusting. But the thought of returning remains. It comes up in conversations with family, in memories of the land, and in the quiet feeling that what he left behind still matters.

For him, migration is not a final goal. It is a temporary phase, a way to manage what is available while waiting for better opportunities.

The Future That Moves

Migration is often seen as a movement, but it also tells a deeper story. It reflects the limits of rural economies and the growing gap between aspirations and opportunities. *If leaving remains the only option, villages will continue to empty. But if staying becomes possible through work, income, and a sense of belonging, the story can change.* ■■■



**SECTION 3:
EMERGING LEADERSHIP
FROM THE GROUND**



A moment of recognition as Prabhasini is felicitated by the Secretary, WCD, Government of NCT of Delhi

Not all Leaders are Elected

Where presence becomes power and care becomes leadership

In many parts of rural India, leadership does not arrive with designation or visibility. It takes shape gradually, through work that is consistent, local, and often unnoticed.

In Kandhamal district of Odisha, this shift is visible in the work of Prabhasini Batkar, who moves from village to village each day, delivering basic healthcare to communities beyond the easy reach of public systems. For the families she visits, this daily walk replaces an 8–10 km journey to the nearest health centre, saving both time and the Rs. 200 to Rs. 500 they would otherwise spend on treatment.

But what Prabhasini carries is not just medicine. It is access, trust, and a quiet authority built over years of working closely with her community. Over time, her consistent engagement

has earned recognition among peers and grassroots practitioners. This commitment reached a significant milestone when she received the C. Subramaniam Award from the National Foundation for India, which honours mid-career community leaders working to mobilise civic action and enable marginalised communities to access their rights and entitlements. The award was conferred at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, in the presence of civil society leaders, academics, and policymakers.

From Presence to Leadership

Prabhasini did not set out to lead. When she joined as a Jansathi in 2018, her role was to support, listen, and understand. She spent time in homes, spoke to women, and became a familiar presence in the village.

Leadership came gradually, shaped by continuous mentoring from Atmashakti and the steady trust she built within the community. Today, she works as a Health Animator, overseeing 113 Swasthya Sathis and ensuring that healthcare reaches some of the most remote hamlets in Kandhamal. Her leadership is not defined by designation, but by dependence; people rely on her.

Care that Creates Voice

Prabhasini's work extends far beyond delivering medicines. She speaks about menstrual hygiene in spaces where such conversations were once avoided, encourages families to grow backyard nutrition gardens, and works with communities to prevent child marriage. In doing so, she is not only improving health but also helping people find their voice and be heard. *"If we don't speak about our*



Ensuring care reaches all, Prabhasini reviews village medicine stocks

health, no one else will. For a long time, women here stayed silent, even when they were unwell. Now, when we start talking openly about our health, our bodies, and our needs, things begin to change. Slowly, the village begins to change with us.”

Her voice has begun to echo in others. Women who once sat quietly in meetings now speak, question, and participate in decisions.

One Story, Many Realities

Prabhasini’s journey is not an isolated one. Across rural Odisha, a similar shift is taking place. Women who were once confined to the margins of public life are stepping into roles that shape households and communities. This leadership is emerging in everyday spaces, in how food is grown and shared, how children are cared for, how rural games are building confidence to negotiate and reduce violence, and how decisions are made within villages.

It is visible in agriculture, where women are promoting nutrition

sensitive practices; in households, where they are improving food diversity; and in community forums, where they are beginning to influence local governance. The change is subtle, but undeniable.

Defying Boundaries

The path to leadership, however, is not without resistance. For many women, stepping into public roles means negotiating social norms that limit mobility and voice. Confidence is built slowly, often in environments where speaking up was never encouraged.

For Prabhasini, walking long distances through forests each day is also a way of crossing these invisible barriers. Each step redefines what is possible, not just for her but for other women observing.

Change that Matters

The impact of this leadership is not always immediate, but it is deeply felt. At the household level, access to

basic healthcare has improved, reducing delays in treatment and out-of-pocket expenses. At the community level, conversations around nutrition, health, and social practices are becoming more open. The Malnutrition-Free Villages initiative that Prabhasini supports now reaches over 21,000 people across 181 villages, demonstrating how local leadership can scale when rooted in trust.

Change that Speaks

The recognition Prabhasini received on a national platform reflects the journeys of many rural, marginalised women who are negotiating space, voice, and visibility.

The next morning, she will walk the same paths again because the change she represents does not arrive with announcements. It builds slowly through presence, persistence, and the courage to step forward. **And in villages like those in Kandhamal, leadership is being redefined, not loudly, but distinctly by women like Prabhasini. ■■■**



Decision-making in motion at the Rayagada Challenge Lab

Where Solutions Begin at Home

Rayagada Challenge Lab Reversing the Flow of Development

In most development stories, decisions travel in one direction. From government to village. From market to farmer. From expert to community. In Rayagada, that flow began to reverse.

For three days in February, in Bism Cuttack, people gathered under the Rayagada Challenge Lab not to be consulted, not to validate plans, but to do something far more fundamental, to lead the thinking itself.

Farmers, weavers, migrant workers, and grassroots women leaders did not wait to be chosen. They chose the issues, framed the questions, and began shaping the responses. The system did not arrive with answers. It was asked to sit, listen, and respond.

Many Voices, One Realisation

At first, it felt familiar, with conversations circling unsafe

drinking water, migration, weak markets, farm distress, and fading crafts, issues people had spoken about many times before. But this was not a meeting of issues. It was a shift in who defines them. As people spoke, the narrative changed. Problems were no longer isolated; they were connected, layered, and lived.

A pineapple farmer was not just talking about prices, but about irrigation, storage, and power in negotiation. A weaver was not just speaking of income, but of forests, materials, and cultural survival. A migrant worker's story was not just about wages, but about the absence of viable livelihoods at home. The community was not listing problems. It was revealing systems.

When Communities Diagnose, Solutions Follow

In one group, pineapple farmers

mapped their own market reality. Two years of labour reduced to a two-minute price decision by traders. No storage. No aggregation. No leverage.

What followed marked a clear shift. They did not ask for answers. Instead, ideas began to emerge from within the group itself, collective aggregation, engaging with markets earlier, and better aligning schemes for storage and transport to support their needs.

The role had reversed. Farmers were no longer recipients of market systems. They were redesigning how those systems should work for them.

Knowledge That Never Left the Village

Among Dongria weavers, the conversation did not begin with markets. It began with memory—with forests, dyes, threads, and the rhythms of making.



In a community circle, a voice rises, sharing the struggle behind sourcing materials for the Dongria Kondh shawl

“Our hands know how to stitch, but we don’t always have money to buy thread,” said Uma Shankar Kadaraka.

What surfaced was not a demand, but a clear pathway, one that focused on securing access to raw materials, protecting forest ecosystems, and building support systems that sustain cultural practices instead of standardising them.

This was not new knowledge being introduced. It was existing knowledge being recognized and finally placed at the centre.

Tracing the Breaks in the System

Discussions on water and migration followed the same pattern. Schemes exist, people said. But they fracture before reaching the last mile. Infrastructure stops short. Information does not flow. Payments are delayed. Departments work in isolation.

But instead of waiting for fixes, communities mapped the breakdowns themselves. They were not asking for delivery. They were identifying where delivery fails and how it can be reconnected.

When Voices Took the Lead

The most powerful shift in the Challenge Lab was not in the issues discussed, but in the roles played. Communities were not speaking to power. They were exercising it. They questioned why schemes do not align. They analysed how markets determine prices. They pointed to where institutions fall out of sync.

And in doing so, they changed the position of everyone else in the room. Officials were no longer just providers. Market actors were no longer distant forces. They became participants in a conversation led by those who live the reality every day.

Samaj, Sarkar, Bazaar in Conversation

For a brief moment, three worlds came together differently. Samaj moved beyond sharing knowledge to



Community circle identifying key issues during the Challenge Lab

setting direction. Sarkar went beyond presenting schemes to responding to lived realities. Bazaar was not just setting prices, but being questioned, challenged, and engaged.

This was not convergence as a concept. It was a re-balancing of roles in real time.

From Conversation to Control

What makes the Rayagada Challenge Lab stand apart is that it did not end as a discussion. It moved toward ownership. Farmers began exploring aggregation models among themselves.

Local actors started identifying precise gaps in storage and transport. Efforts emerged to align schemes with realities defined by communities, not assumptions from outside.

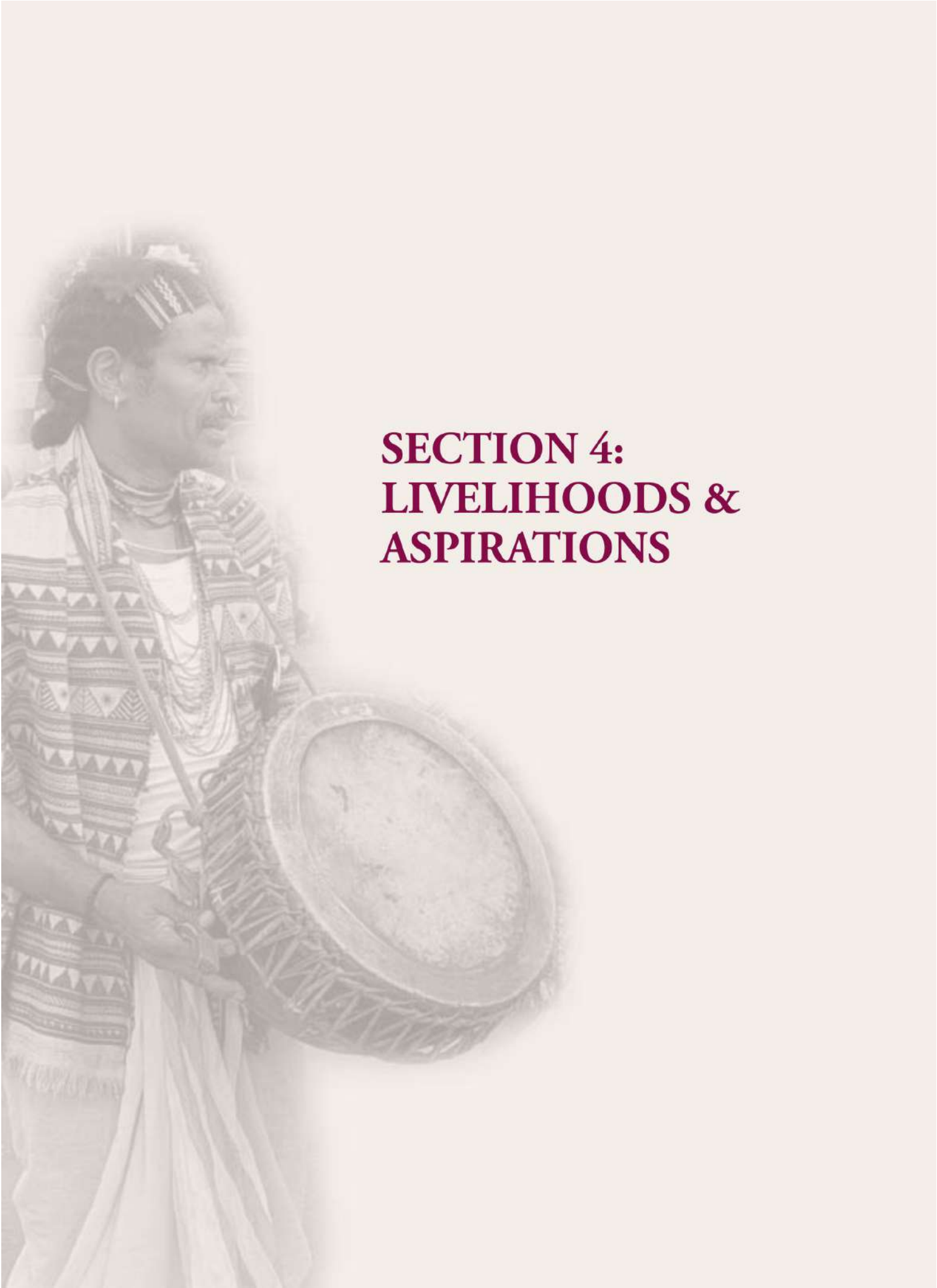
The direction was no longer being handed down. It was being built from within.

A Different Starting Point

For Golaka Sikaka, development is not a scheme, it is whether two years of labour earn a fair price. For Uma Shankar Kadaraka, it is whether weaving can continue without losing its roots.

The Challenge Lab did not produce a blueprint. It did something more decisive. It changed where development begins. Not in offices. Not in plans. But in the lived intelligence of communities that understand their realities better than anyone else.

In Rayagada, the question is no longer whether solutions exist. It is whether systems are ready to follow the communities that are already leading them. ■■■



**SECTION 4:
LIVELIHOODS &
ASPIRATIONS**



The Drawing That Refused to Stay on Paper

In classrooms far from cities, rural youth are redrawing the idea of progress

On a classroom wall in Bichhiwara block of Rajasthan's Dungarpur district, a drawing hangs quietly. At first glance, it seems ordinary. But look closer. Within its lines unfold a different village, with classrooms filled with light, books within reach, and digital tools at hand. It is not just a scene, but a shift, where learning travels beyond geography and possibility begins to redraw reality.

Between 1 and 10 December 2025, tribal hostels and colleges across Rajasthan and other states came alive with colour, imagination, and quiet aspiration. Tribal and rural youth gathered for a painting competition under the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. What unfolded on paper was not just art, but a window into how young people in remote regions see

their present and imagine their future.

A Story Behind the Painting

Among the many striking works, one painting stood out, not merely for its detail, but for the story behind it. Created by Bipin Bhagore, a first-year BA student, the artwork traces the journey of a young tribal boy, the first in his family to enter higher education. For Bipin, education is not just a personal achievement. It is a turning point for his family and for the village he comes from.

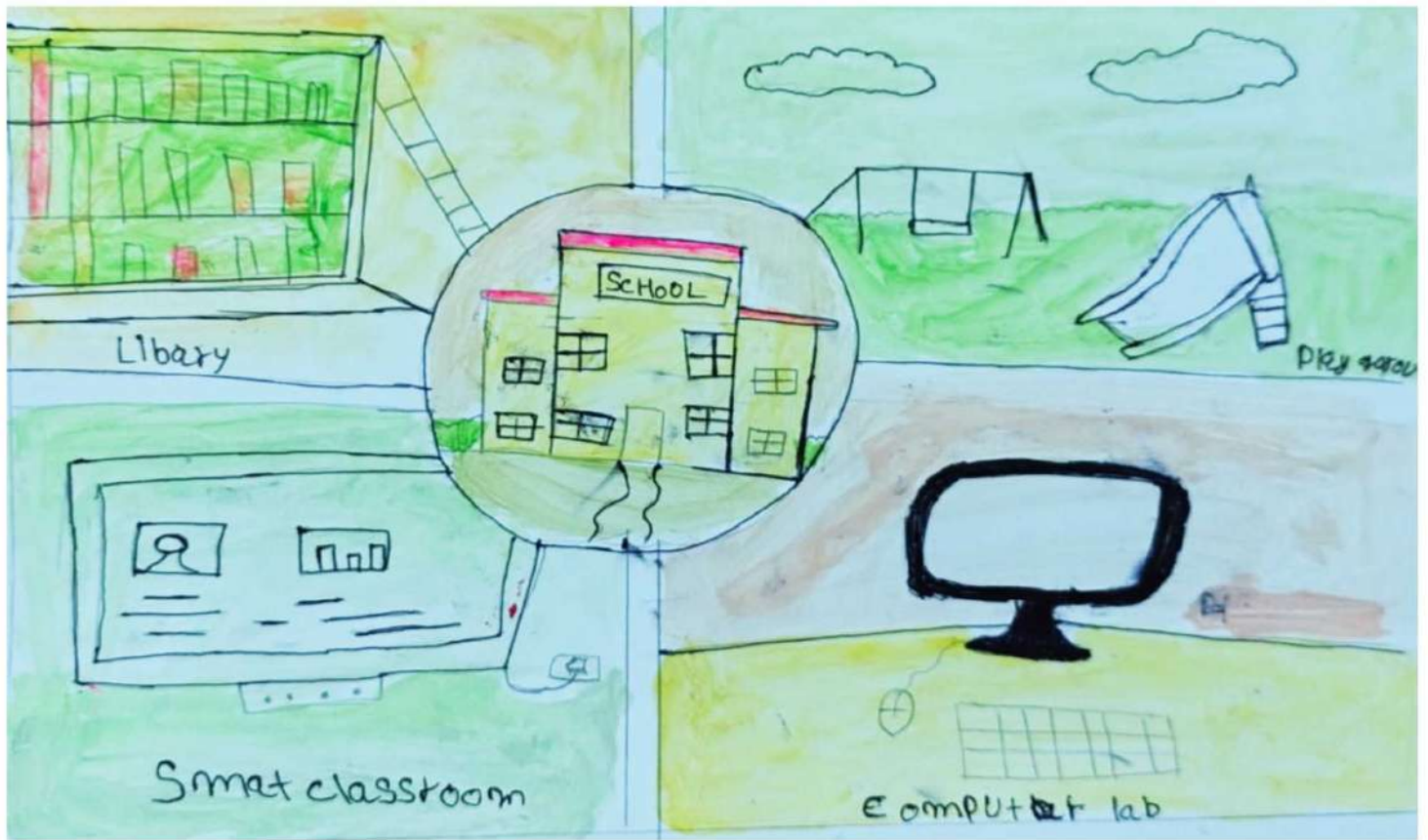
A Village Re-imagined

His painting reflects this aspiration with clarity. It imagines a village

where schools are well-built, where children have access to libraries and digital tools, and where learning is not limited by location. In the frame, one can see children studying with confidence, much like their counterparts in cities.

"I want my younger brother and others in the village to study in a place where they don't feel left behind," Bipin said during a sharing session. *"They should be able to dream like any child in a city."*

The painting moves between two realities. One is familiar with limited infrastructure, uneven access, and the quiet struggle of being a first-generation learner. The other is imagined, but not distant, a future where quality education reaches villages with dignity.



Vikshit Bharat on canvas, by Bipin Bhagore

Voices Finding Space

Bipin's work is not an exception. It reflects a wider sentiment among the participants.

Many of the young people who took part in the initiative come from communities where access to higher education remains limited. For them, the canvas became a space to express not just what they see around them, but what they hope to build.

The event itself created room for these voices to emerge. Young women, first-generation learners, and students from remote areas participated actively. The discussions that followed the painting sessions turned each artwork into a lived narrative—of struggle, of hope, and of possibility. Across these conversations, a common thread emerged: development must reach the last mile, and education must carry dignity with it.

From Expression to Change

As the selected paintings move to exhibitions at the block, state, and national levels, they carry more than colour and composition. They carry the voice of a generation that is asking for change—quietly, but

with clarity. What this initiative makes evident is simple. When young people like Bipin are given space, they do not just express dreams. They begin to define the future. ■■■

Vikshit Bharat imagined through the strokes of a student's brush





Articulating visions of rural entrepreneurship

The Idea That **Waits to Begin**

In Mayurbhanj, a young writer imagines an enterprise, the system yet to meet her halfway

Kanakalata Marndi, 19, sits at a desk in her classroom in Khunta block of Mayurbhanj. The room is quiet, filled with the soft, steady sound of pens moving across paper. She leans over her notebook, writes a few lines, then pauses. She reads them again, crosses out a word, and starts over.

It is not that she does not know what to write. She is trying to say it clearly. There is a lot on her mind, dreams, ideas, small plans taking shape, but finding the right words takes time. Today, she has a reason to put those thoughts down. An essay competition on entrepreneurship has brought her and her classmates to their desks, each carrying their own ideas. There is no real sense of competition in the room, only a quiet focus, each student trying to express something of their own.

Kanakalata begins simply. *“Our forest already gives us everything, but we do not earn from it the way we should.”* She is one among many participants. But what she is writing does not feel like an assignment. It reads like something she has seen closely, thought about often, and is now trying to put into words.

An Idea Rooted in the Forest

Kanakalata’s idea is simple. She wants to start a small unit in her village to process forest produce, sal leaves, tamarind, and mahua into products that can be sold beyond the weekly haat.

“We collect these things every year, but we sell them raw. I heard others earn more from what we gather, because they have the opportunity to add value to it.”

In her essay, she imagines a different system. One where value stays in the village. Where young people, especially women, work together to clean, process, package, and sell. *“It should not go outside first; we should process and finish the work here,”* she said quietly in her essay. Her idea reflects a larger pattern emerging from such platforms, where tribal youth are encouraged to think of enterprises rooted in their ecology, culture, and community life, rather than external models of business, which do not align with their practice and culture.

More Than Income

For Kanakalata, this is not only about earning. “It is also about respect,” she says. *“If we build something here, people will not say that nothing is possible in our village.”* Around her,

other participants are writing similar ideas. A millet-based food centre. A tailoring group. A small digital service kiosk.

But Kanakalata keeps returning to the forest because she feels this is what they know. And why should they leave it and go somewhere else? Her words carry a quiet clarity, enterprise, for her, is not separate from identity. It is a continuation of it.

Where the Idea Meets its Limits

Yet, even as she writes, Kanakalata is aware of the distance between an idea and its beginning. ***“If we people had some money, we would start a small processing unit in our village,”*** she says. But access to such support remains uncertain.

She also speaks of things she has only heard about, such as registration, licences, and markets beyond the local haat. These are processes they do not yet fully understand. They need someone to guide them.

Her hesitation reflects a broader pattern. Across regions, young people are able to imagine enterprises, but often lack the capital, mentorship, and local systems needed to take the first step. As a result, many ideas remain where they are first expressed in essays, in conversations, in thought.

A Platform, and a Possibility

The essay competition she is part of was designed to do more than collect ideas. It aims to identify young people like Kanakalata and connect them with opportunities for support and mentorship.

For a few hours, the classroom becomes a space where these

possibilities feel close. Participants share their ideas aloud. Some speak hesitantly, others with confidence. As she submits her essay, a volunteer asks what she is thinking. Kanakalata replies with quiet confidence that she does not want her idea to remain only in writing.

Beyond the Page

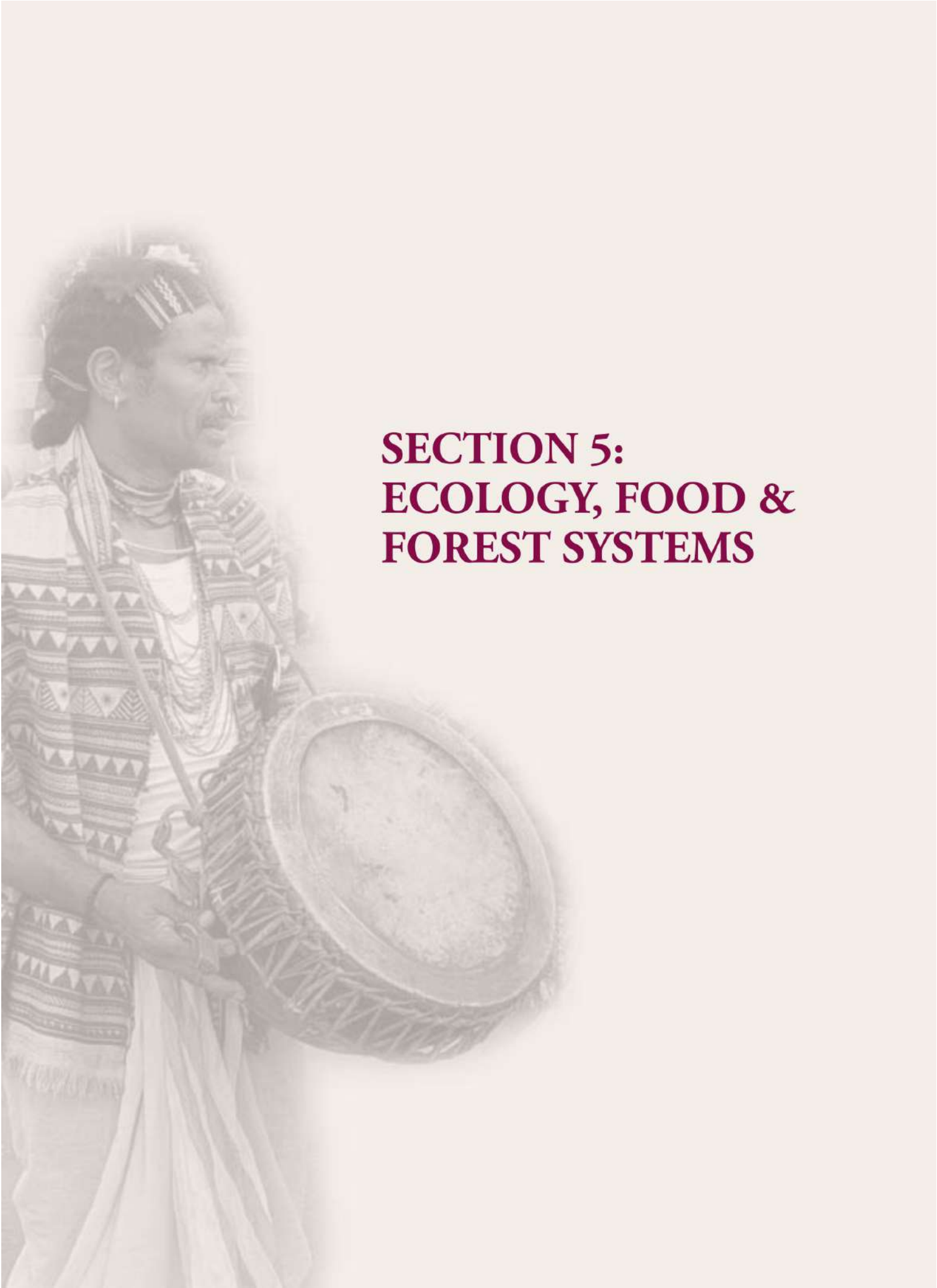
By the end of the session, her essay is handed in with the rest. It will be read, maybe shortlisted, perhaps written about later. But for her, what matters is not what happens next to the paper, but what she chooses to do with the idea she has put into it. In a village where opportunity is often linked to leaving, Kanakalata is

imagining what it means to stay and build. Her idea is not unusual, and that is what makes it matter. Across tribal regions, many young people are thinking in similar ways. They are not short of ideas, nor are they unwilling to act. What remains uncertain is whether the systems around them will respond in time.

As the session ends, Kanakalata folds her hands over the desk, carrying with her a quiet hope that what she has written might one day take shape beyond the page. ■■■



Narrating dreams of rural entrepreneurship



**SECTION 5:
ECOLOGY, FOOD &
FOREST SYSTEMS**



Weaving livelihoods with skill and care, tribal women craft bamboo baskets in their village

Where Livelihoods Grow with the Forest

Holding together ecology, income, and identity

Before the sun rises in Kondagaon, Bastar, Sushila is already awake. There is no clock, no alarm. She just knows it is time. The mahua flowers have started falling. With a basket on her back, she steps out into the cool morning and walks toward the sal forest. The path is familiar. The air smells slightly sweet. Under the trees, fresh mahua flowers lie scattered on the ground.

She bends and begins to pick them, slowly and carefully. *“The forest gives us what we need,”* she says softly, her hands moving with ease.

For Sushila, this is not just work. It is part of her daily life. Something she has learned over the years, just like others before her. By the time the village wakes up, her day has already begun. Here, the forest feeds first. The market comes later. Across India’s forest regions, many mornings begin like this, quiet, simple, but important.

Where Forests Shape Lives and Livelihoods

Across India, nearly 275 million people rely on forests for their livelihoods, according to World Bank estimates.

But here, livelihoods are not separate from life itself. In a village in Jharkhand, Birua, an elderly farmer, does not speak of income when he speaks of the forest. Instead, he talks about time. *“When the sal trees bloom, we celebrate together,”* he says. *“And when the forest rests, we rest too.”*

His words are not metaphors. They are a lived reality.

Collecting tendu leaves, gathering honey, picking mahua, stitching sal leaf plates, these are not just economic activities. They are part of a rhythm that binds people to seasons, to each other, and to the

forest itself.

The forest is not just a resource. It is a way of living.

Growing Pressure on Forest Lives

But this rhythm is beginning to weaken. In Gadchiroli, Kusum measures the change not in years, but in time spent in the forest. *“Earlier, we would return by noon with our baskets full,”* she says. *“Now we walk longer, search harder, and still come back with less.”*

Her voice carries neither complaint nor surprise, only a quiet acknowledgment of change. Across forest regions, such shifts are becoming common. What was once close is now distant. What was once abundant now requires time and labour.

Access, too, remains uncertain. Even



Community sorting and sharing forest produce for collective livelihoods

where rights exist on paper, they do not always translate into everyday ease. The forest is still there, but reaching it, and living from it, is becoming harder.

Community Stewardship Where the Forest Returns through its People

And yet, something is slowly changing.

In many villages, women no longer collect alone. They move together, sharing the work, pooling what they bring back, and deciding when to sell and when to wait. Alongside them, young people are beginning to take on a greater role, helping with collection, learning the forest's cycles, and finding new ways to use and sell what it provides.

“If we sell together, we get a better price,” Sushila says, not as a plan, but as something they have understood over time.

In another village, Birua watches this change with quiet attention. The younger members are no longer just following old ways; they are building on them. They sort, clean, and sometimes process forest produce

before it leaves the village.

“Earlier, everything would go as it is,” he says. *“Now, we try to do a little more before it leaves.”* These may seem like small steps, but they are beginning to shift how communities engage with the forest and the market.

At the same time, older practices continue to guide them. Kusum speaks of parts of the forest that are left untouched. *“Some places are not for taking every year,”* she says. *“If we take everything, what will remain?”*

These unwritten rules of when to take, what to leave, and how much is enough are not taught in classrooms, but passed on through living and doing. Now, as younger people learn and carry them forward, they become even more important.

In all these ways, the forest is not just being used. It is being cared for together, across generations.

Climate Connection Nature’s Immediate Shield

In broader conversations, forests are

often described in terms of climate, carbon storage, mitigation, and resilience. But here, the meaning is simpler.

“When crops fail, we go to the forest,” Sushila says. Her sentence does not carry urgency. It carries certainty. A healthy forest means food in uncertain months, income when other sources fall short, and stability when seasons behave unpredictably.

Birua puts it differently: *“If the forest is good, we manage.”* As climate patterns shift, this quiet dependence becomes even more significant. Many families are adapting, combining forest-based livelihoods with small farming and other work.

But the foundation remains unchanged.

The Forest Future is the Community Future

The future of forests will not be decided only in policies or plantations. It will unfold in places like Kondagaon, where Sushila continues to gather mahua at dawn. It will take shape in Birua’s village, where life still follows the flowering of trees.

It will be felt in Kusum’s daily walk, growing longer, but still rooted in the forest.

“The forest feeds us first,” Sushila says. It is a simple statement, but it carries a larger truth. *If forests are to survive, the people who live with them must carry them with, not at the margins, but at the centre. Because in the end, the future of forests is the future of their communities.* ■■■



Preparing and sharing traditional foods on banana leaves, celebrating community and indigenous culinary traditions

Flavours That Grow Without Farming

How India's indigenous foods hold the secret to nutrition, memory, and survival

The first bite is always a surprise...

It is sharp, sour, and slightly smoky. Not the kind of taste you ease into, but the kind that wakes you up. On my plate is a simple meal of rice, a spicy chutney, and a small portion of fermented bamboo shoot. There is no garnish, no plating drama, just food that has been made the same way for generations.

And yet, it tastes like nothing you have had before.

Welcome to India's forest kitchens, where some of the most powerful foods never make it to restaurants, supermarkets, or Instagram feeds.

What You Won't Find on a Menu

Across central and eastern India, food does not always come from farms. It

comes from forests. With the first monsoon rains, bamboo shoots push through the soil, soft, pale, and fresh. They arrive quietly, but are instantly recognised in village kitchens. No one plants them. No one waters them. And yet, every household knows exactly what to do when they appear.

For people like Geeta Sijui from Jharkhand, this is simply part of everyday life. ***"No one plants bamboo. It grows in the forest, and we bring it home,"*** she says.

A Recipe That Lives in Memory

In her village, Geeta learned to make hendua from her mother. There is no written recipe. Only memory, smell, and time. Fresh bamboo shoots are peeled, finely chopped,

and packed tightly into an earthen pot. Sometimes they are wrapped in leaves. Then they are left to ferment for days. No preservatives. No shortcuts. Just time doing its work.

When the lid is opened, the smell is strong, sharp, almost overwhelming. But that is when you know it is ready.

To cook it, she heats a little mustard oil in a pan, adds red chilli and chopped tomato, and then a handful of shredded fermented bamboo. It sizzles, softens, and releases a deep, sour aroma. ***"Hendua is our pickle, our spice, our medicine,"*** she says. ***"We eat it throughout the year."***

Served with hot rice, it is simple food. But it carries months of preservation, generations of learning, and a taste that defines the region.



A tribal woman prepares indigenous food for community sharing

Food That Heals, Not Just Fills

What strikes most food lovers is not just the flavour, but the purpose. Fermented bamboo is rich in probiotics. Fresh shoots are high in fibre and minerals. Mahua flowers, another forest staple, are packed with natural sugars and nutrients. Long before nutrition labels, communities understood what their bodies needed and how to find it in the forest.

So Why Are These Foods Disappearing?

And yet, these foods are slowly fading from everyday life. The forests are still there. Bamboo still grows. But fewer people are cooking it. Migration, changing tastes, and the ease of packaged food are reshaping diets. Many young people now find fermented foods too strong or unfamiliar.

In Odisha, this shift is clearly visible. These recipes are now rarely seen and are remembered more than practiced.

When a recipe is lost, it is not just a dish that disappears. It is knowledge of how to ferment, how to preserve, and how to live with the seasons.

Why This Matters More Than Ever

In a world searching for sustainable and nutritious food systems, these forest foods already offer clear answers. They require no chemical inputs, grow naturally, and adapt easily to changing climates. They also hold economic potential. Dried bamboo shoots are sold in local markets, and some communities have begun packaging them for wider consumption. These small efforts show that forest foods can support both livelihoods and nutrition.

Yet, their value remains largely unrecognised. These foods are still missing from mainstream markets, policies, and nutrition programmes. What exists on the ground as a strong, self-sustaining system has not yet been fully acknowledged or

supported at a larger scale.

More Than Just Food

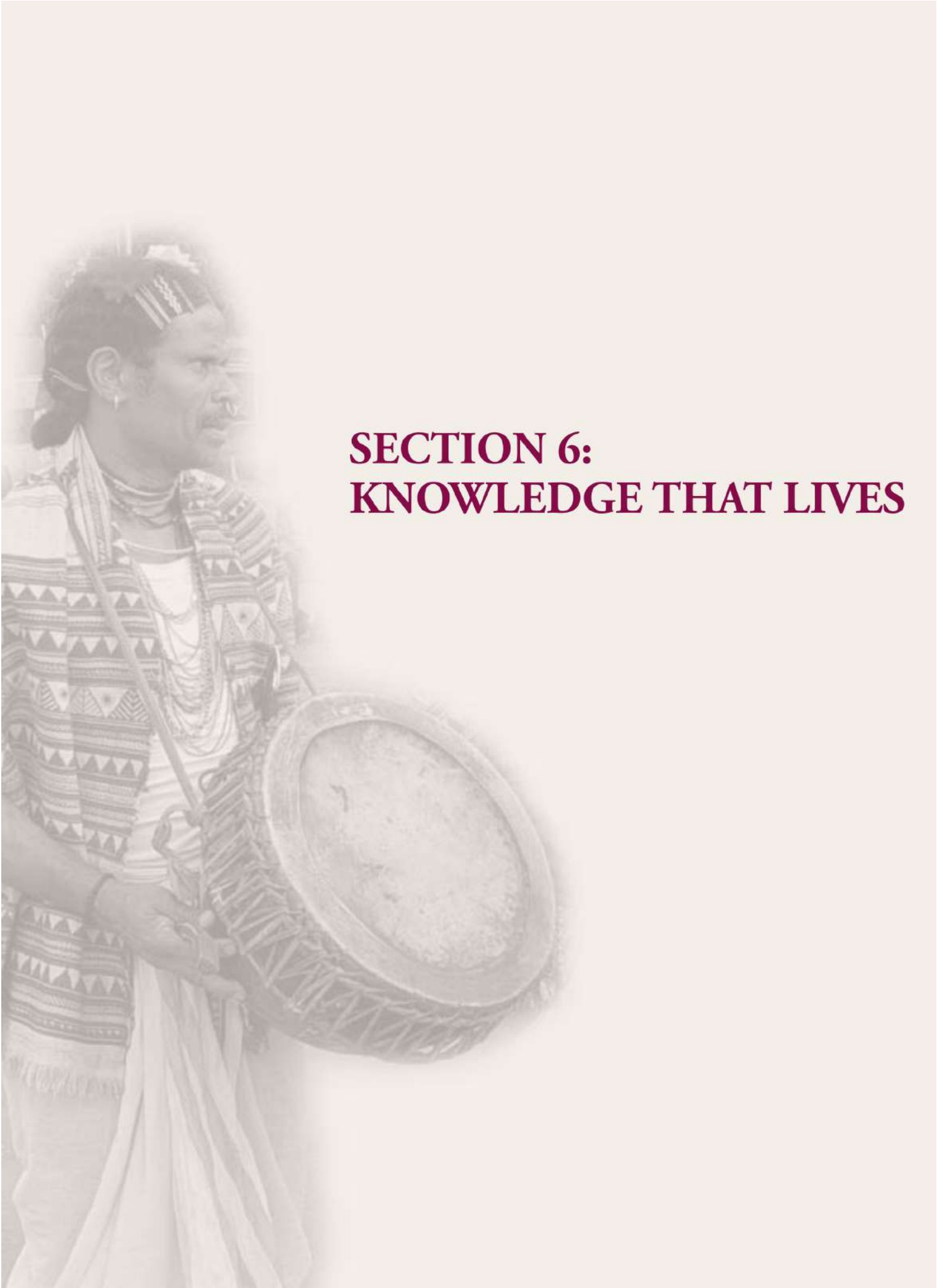
By the time the meal ends, something shifts. You begin to realise that this is not just about taste. It is about a way of living where food is closely tied to land, memory, and identity. Cooking here is not only about preparing a meal, it is about preserving knowledge, seasons, and relationships.

These foods carry more than flavour. They carry stories of forests, of communities, and of generations who learned how to live with what the land offers. In a time when food systems are becoming more uniform and distant from nature, these traditions remind us that nourishment can also be local, diverse, and deeply rooted.

Because here, food is not just what fills you. It is what holds everything together. The question, then, is not whether these foods are disappearing. It is whether we are willing to recognise their value, support the communities that sustain them, and bring them back into everyday life. Because their future depends not only on memory, but on practice. ■■■



Fresh wild saag, handpicked and being prepared for a traditional dish



**SECTION 6:
KNOWLEDGE THAT LIVES**



Youth gather elders' words and emotions on ecology and life, preserving them for future generations

Where Knowledge Lives

How wisdom flows across generations in rural India

“We must teach the coming generation not just how to live with changing times, but how to hold on to our culture. If we forget our traditions and knowledge, they will slowly disappear...”

These words come from Hamilal Marawi, an elder from Dharamपुरi village in Mandla, Madhya Pradesh. He can no longer write himself. So he sits quietly, gathers his thoughts, and speaks them slowly, while a young volunteer beside him listens and writes each word with care.

He does not rush. He pauses often, searching for the right words, sometimes repeating a line, as if trying to ensure it carries exactly what he feels. At times, he falls silent, his gaze drifting, as though the memories he draws from are heavier than what can be easily spoken.

In every line, there is more than memory. There is a quiet pain, a fear that the life he has known, the

rhythms of the forest, the wisdom of the land, may fade if they are not remembered and carried forward. This letter to his grandson, Mithanlal Marawi, is not just for today. It carries a lifetime within it, reaching gently toward a future he may never see, but deeply cares about.

It is not just a letter. It is a hand reaching across time, hoping someone will hold on.

Across villages, such letters are becoming a way for elders to speak directly to the next generation, to their grandsons, granddaughters, and village youth. They are not written as advice alone, but as emotional reminders of ways of

living, of knowing, and of belonging that may fade if they are not carried forward.

What This Knowledge Holds

For Hamilal, knowledge has never been something written down. It is something lived.

He remembers seeds that did not promise high yields, but never failed the soil. **“Our seeds were less yielding,”** he tells the young volunteer, “but they were resilient. We could save them, sow them again, trust them.”

He remembers forests not just as spaces, but as providers. Seasonal greens, wild fruits, and grains shaped

their meals. **“Forest foods kept our elders healthy for a hundred years,”** he says, almost as if recalling a different time altogether.

He speaks of medicine not from clinics, but from memory. Plants, roots, leaves, each with a purpose. “I have knowledge of medicinal plants,” he says quietly, “and I use them for treatment.”

And then there are things harder to write down, songs, rituals, ways of sitting together, ways of respecting land and elders. Things that are not taught, but absorbed.

Why It Is At Risk

As Hamilal speaks, there is a shift in his voice.

He has seen change. Forests thinning. Fields changing. Young people leaving.

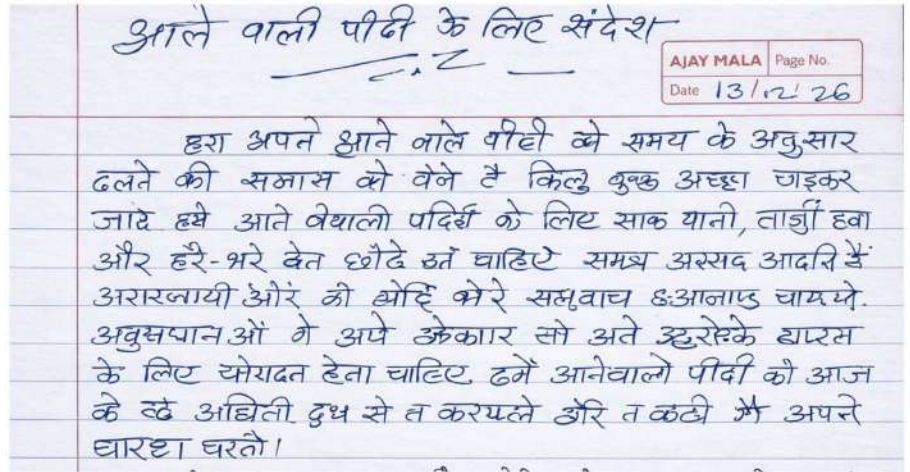
“Today’s youth are forgetting their own culture,” he says, echoing what many elders across regions feel.

In his village, food has changed. Packaged items replace what once came from the forest. Seeds now come from markets, not from last season’s harvest. Songs that once rose in groups are now replaced by loudspeakers and DJ music. He does not say this with anger. There is no blame in his words. Only concern.

“If forests do not remain,” he adds slowly, **“our life will not remain.”** What is being lost, he knows, is not just practice. It is a way of understanding life itself.

Stories of Continuity

And yet, Hamilal is not speaking into silence. Around him, things are beginning to shift. The very act of



A grandfather’s letter to his grandchildren, carrying care and emotion for nature and life

speaking this letter is part of that change. Through efforts like the Indigenous Yatra Listening Campaign’s Letters from Elders, people like him are finding ways to pass on what they carry. They sit with young people, speak, remember, and allow their words to be written.

In Gaon Chaupals, these letters are read aloud. People gather. They listen, not as an audience, but as inheritors. Hamilal’s words, once spoken softly to a volunteer, now travel further. They reach other homes, other villages, other young listeners. Some messages are simple, like protect forests, stay rooted, respect traditions. Others are deeply practical, such as how to farm without chemicals, how to preserve seeds, and how to recognise healing plants.

For Hamilal, this is new. His knowledge, once held only in memory, now exists on paper.

Why It Matters Today

In a world that often looks for solutions from outside, Hamilal’s life offers something different. His knowledge is not theoretical. It has been tested through seasons, droughts, abundance, and scarcity. It is local, adaptive, and deeply connected to the land.

But more than that, it is identity. For him, culture is not separate from farming, or food, or forest. It is all one system. To lose one is to weaken the others.

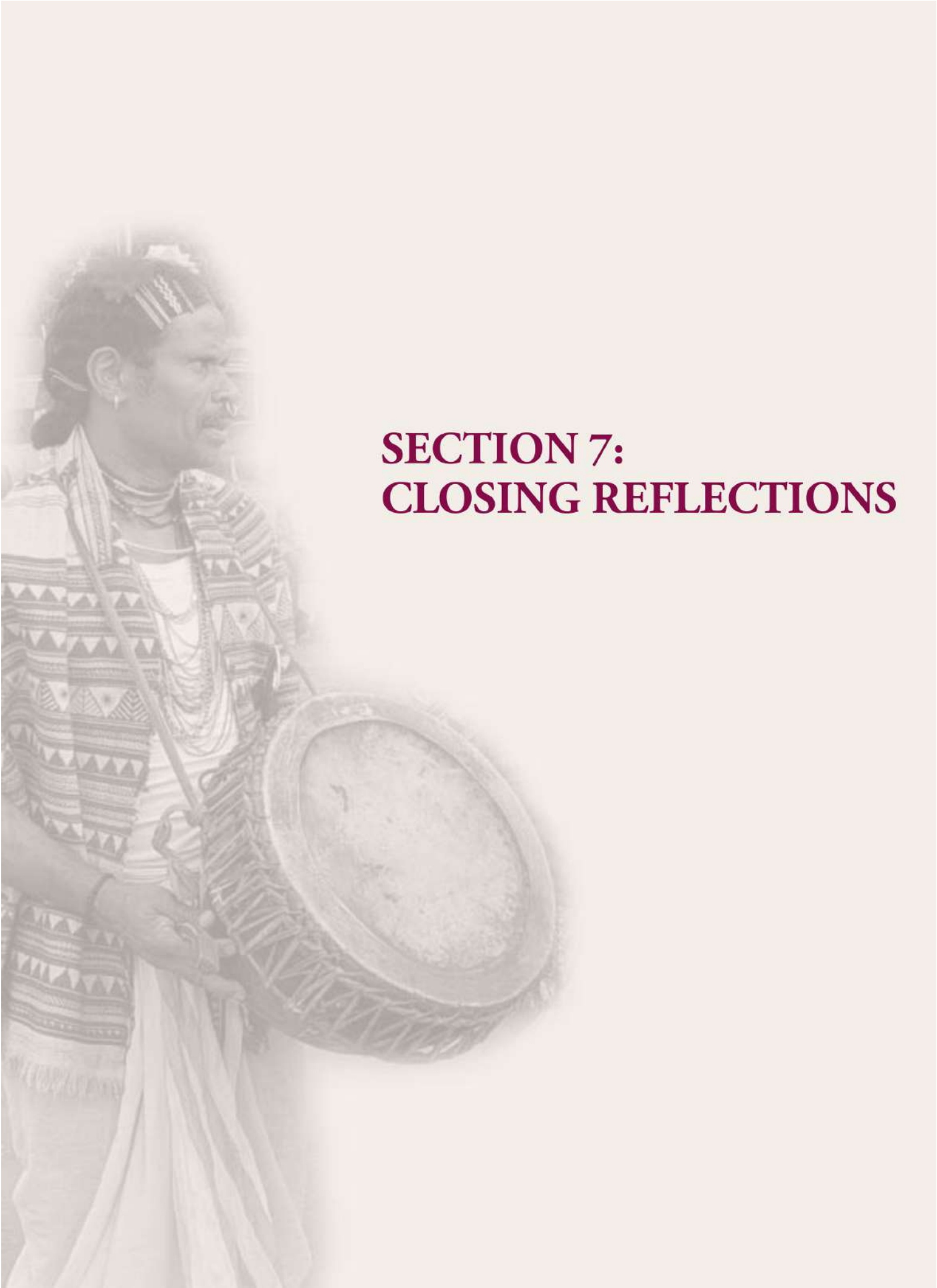
And slowly, he sees that some young people are beginning to understand this again.

“They are starting to see,” he says, **“that what we had was not backward. It was strength.”**

A Living Heritage

The letter is finished. The young volunteer reads it back to him. Hamilal listens carefully, correcting a word here, adding a pause there. When he is satisfied, he nods. The paper is folded. For him, it is just a letter to his grandson. But in that moment, it is also something more. It will be kept, perhaps in a small box or a community centre. It may be read years later by someone who never met him.

The exact words may fade. But the feeling will remain. And somewhere, in another time, someone may read it and understand not just what Hamilal said, but how he lived. Because this knowledge does not live in books, it lives in people. And as long as someone holds on, it continues. ■■■



**SECTION 7:
CLOSING REFLECTIONS**



Tribal and grassroots leaders take a pledge to protect and nurture ecology, community bonds, and tribal life

What Rural India Can Teach the World

Rethinking development through the lens of community wisdom

The journey across villages did not produce a singular conclusion. Instead, it revealed a consistent pattern.

Across regions, communities articulated similar concerns—limited livelihood options, underutilised land, declining access to forests, and uneven institutional support. At the same time, they demonstrated existing practices that continue to sustain local economies and ecosystems.

Findings from the listening process, which **engaged over 57,000 people across 3,400 villages**, suggest that the issue is not the absence of knowledge, but the limited alignment between community systems and formal development frameworks.

KEY LESSONS **Community First**

In most villages, decision-making remains embedded in collective

processes. Community discussions shape how resources are used, how risks are managed, and how responsibilities are shared. Evidence from field interactions indicates that where collective institutions such as self-help groups or village-level committees are active, there is better coordination in activities like seed sharing, procurement, and local market engagement. However, their role remains uneven and often under-supported.

Nature Aligned

Agriculture and forest use continue to follow ecological cycles. Cropping patterns are aligned with rainfall variability, and forest produce contributes significantly to household consumption and income.

Studies on non-timber forest produce (NTFP) indicate that forest-dependent households derive

a substantial share of seasonal income and nutrition from forest resources. Yet, access constraints and regulatory frameworks often limit community participation in forest management.

Collective Knowledge Systems

Knowledge systems in rural areas are decentralised and practice-based. Farmers rely on seasonal indicators, seed diversity, and mixed cropping systems. Women play a central role in maintaining food diversity and nutritional practices.

Despite this, such knowledge systems remain largely invisible in formal planning processes, which tend to privilege standardised technical solutions.

What Development Gets Wrong

Development frameworks often operate through sectoral divisions—agriculture, forestry,



An elder sharing his wisdom and vision for Viksit Bharat 2047

livelihoods—addressed through separate schemes and departments. However, field insights suggest that these domains are closely interlinked. For instance, fallow land cultivation is tied not only to seed access, but also to water availability, market linkages, and labour dynamics.

There is also an emphasis on scalability and uniformity. While these approaches facilitate administrative efficiency, they may not account for local variability. As a result, interventions sometimes fail to integrate with existing practices. Data from the listening exercise further indicates that while schemes are present, awareness and accessibility remain uneven, particularly in remote and tribal regions.

What Needs to Change

A shift towards more integrated and participatory approaches appears necessary.

This includes recognising

communities as knowledge holders and active agents in development. Strengthening local institutions—such as self-help groups, producer collectives, and forest user groups—can enable more decentralised and responsive systems.

There is also a need to improve convergence between **Samaj, Sarkar, and Bazaar**. Current gaps between community priorities, government schemes, and market mechanisms often result in inefficiencies. Policy frameworks may benefit from incorporating flexibility, allowing adaptation to local conditions. Integrating community knowledge into planning processes can enhance both relevance and sustainability.

Linking Back

Across different contexts, agriculture, migration, forests, and livelihoods, a common thread emerges.

Agricultural challenges are linked to water and input access. Migration reflects both economic necessity and limited local opportunities. Forests continue to function as safety nets, even as governance structures evolve.

These patterns indicate that rural challenges are systemic rather than isolated, requiring responses that are similarly interconnected.

Final Reflection

The evidence suggests that many elements of sustainable development—diversified farming, resource conservation, collective institutions—are already present within rural systems.

The question is not whether solutions exist, but whether they are recognised and supported.

Development, in this context, may require a shift in approach—from introducing external models to strengthening existing systems. The future may lie in what we have ignored. ■■■



A village elder in Rajasthan contributes indigenous seeds to a “wisdom box,” a living repository of knowledge.

GAPa Academy

Where stories don't just travel—they transform.

COMING SOON

**Stories are everywhere.
But what if stories could change systems?**

GAPA Academy is a first-of-its-kind, community-led initiative that enables rural and Indigenous communities to **tell their own stories, investigate** their realities, and shape decisions that affect their lives.

What to expect:

- Grassroots storytelling & podcasting
- Youth, women & Sarpanch leadership training
- Real-time digital action & governance engagement
- Investigative "Challenge Labs" linking Samaj—Sarkar—Bazaar

"Gapa hele bhi satta" — Stories can be true.

📍 Launching soon in Odisha, with plans to scale across India

GAPA Academy

Where stories don't just travel — they transform.

Atmashakti Trust acknowledges the contributions of its team members from the ground who cover 'Stories of Change'.

Atmashakti
TRUST

Atmashakti Trust, E-72, Sector 50,
Near Ramagya School, Noida,
Uttar Pradesh - 201301,
Tel: 0120-4117535

Email: info@atmashaktitrust.com
communications@atmashaktitrust.com

www.atmashaktitrust.org

Atmashakti, meaning "power of the soul," reflects our belief that the strength of a community lies in its collective spirit. Registered in 1995 and actively working since 2009, we've been channeling this inner power to unite and empower marginalized communities, with a focus on reaching 10% of the rural poor, especially among Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. As a catalyst for change, we build/facilitate community's agency within these communities, enabling them to assert their rights, influence policy, and ensure their voices shape inclusive development. Through collective action and shared agency, Atmashakti transforms grassroots strength into powerful, transformative change.

FOLLOW US
ON OUR SOCIAL NETWORKS

