



THE HINDU



GS Paper 3-Environment

Tribal families stage protest, say sacred groves in Similipal turned into enclosure for tigress

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BHUBANESWAR

Tribal families, which once inhabited the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) in Odisha, have alleged that their rights to continue their age-old rituals in the sacred forest groves have been denied following the translocation of a tigress from Maharashtra.

According to them, their villages in STR have been fenced off, now deemed part of the territo-



Former residents of Jamunagarh submitting a memo to the Principal

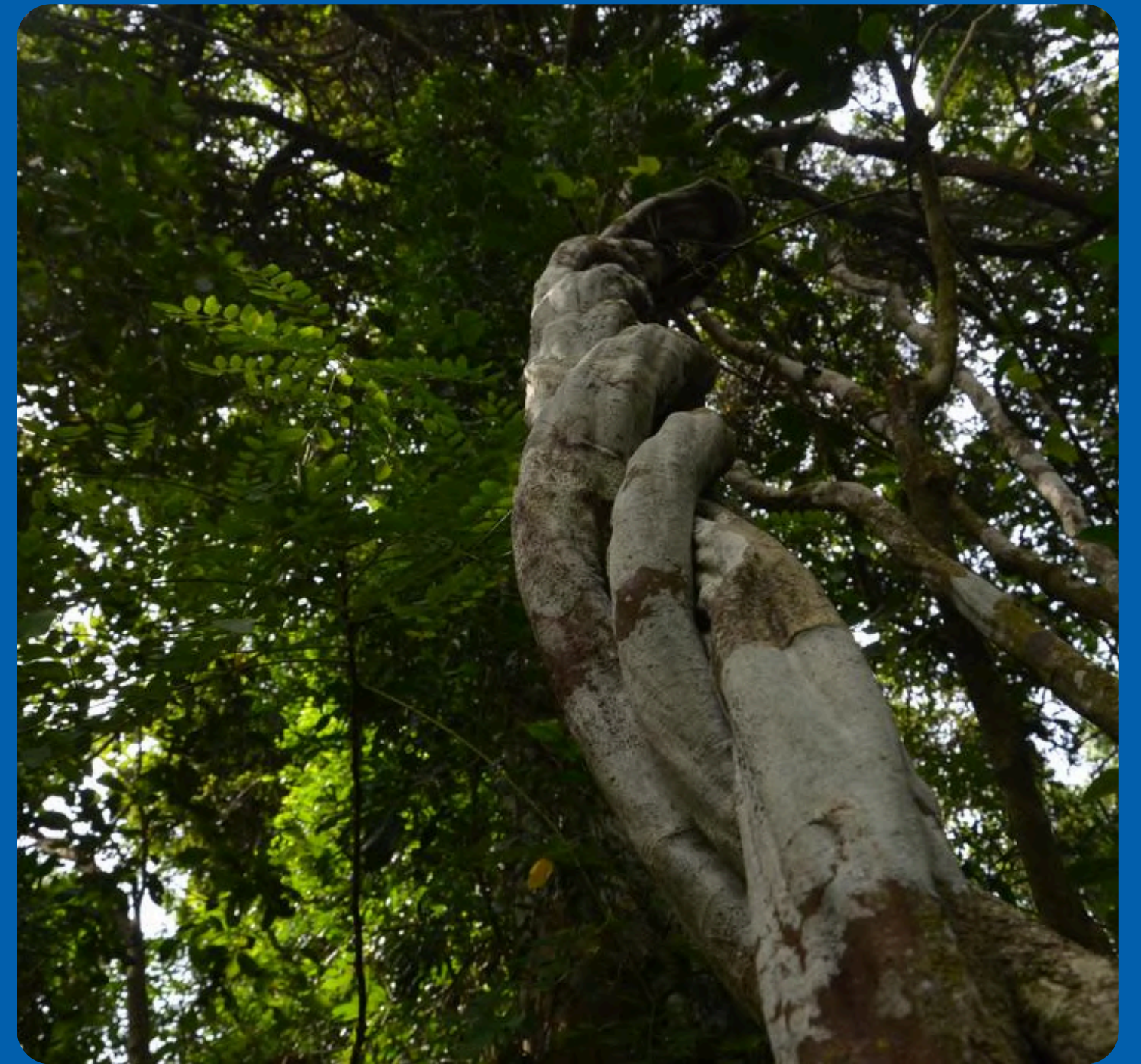
and elders even died after getting separated from our homelands, deities, and ancestors," said Mr. Sae.

'Not allowed'

"Since last month, the authorities of STR are preventing us from entering Jamunagarh and worshipping at our sacred spaces. The Deputy Director of South Wildlife Division categorically told us that we cannot go to our village to perform our sacred rites because our lands are now

KEY POINTS

- Sacred groves are community-managed forest patches, deeply rooted in local traditions and beliefs. They are protected by customary laws and taboos, often prohibiting resource extraction except for medicinal plants by designated custodians. These groves hold cultural and spiritual significance, linked to the community's relationship with spirits and gods





THE HINDU



GS Paper 2-Governance

The RTI is now the 'right to deny information'

The introduction of the Right to Information (RTI) Act was a move that generated great hope among citizens since it recognised them to be the rulers of the nation. It empowered them to seek information from the government, with dignity and respect. It looked as if the 'swaraj' that they had missed would be delivered to them. The Act codified their fundamental right to information and was one of the best transparency laws in the world. It appeared that it would curb corruption and arbitrariness, with citizens being the vigilance monitors of their government. But, it must be conceded, it has fallen far short of our expectations and the state of our democracy is not better.

Within a few months, the government realised that this was a transfer of power from public servants to the citizens. In less than a year it moved to amend the law which would have weakened the RTI Act. But there were widespread protests by citizens across the nation. Sensing the mood of the nation, the government dropped the amendments.

A gradual erosion

The RTI Act had created Information Commissions as the final appellate authorities to implement the law. Most of the posts of 'information commissioner' were taken up by retired bureaucrats. After working for decades as senior bureaucrats, it was difficult for them to hand over power to citizens and recognise that they were the rightful owners of the government. No attempt was made to select people with a record in transparency. Many of them looked at these jobs as post-retirement sinecures and worked only for a few hours. While the national



Shailesh Gandhi

is a former Central Information Commissioner

judgments was that the exemptions listed under Section 8 of the RTI Act were restrictions on a citizen's fundamental right and had to be construed strictly as in the law. Parliament intended most information to be provided and crafted the exemptions carefully.

The entire approach to a citizen's right to information changed in August 2011 when the Supreme Court of India held in *Central Board of Secondary Education & Anr. vs Aditya Bandopadhyay & Ors*, in paragraph 33: "Some High Courts have held that section 8 of RTI Act is in the nature of an exception to section 3 which empowers the citizens with the right to information, which is a derivative from the freedom of speech; and that therefore section 8 should be construed strictly, literally and narrowly. This may not be the correct approach."

In paragraph 37 it made a comment without any evidence: "Indiscriminate and impractical demands or directions under RTI Act for disclosure of all and sundry information (unrelated to transparency and accountability in the functioning of public authorities and eradication of corruption) would be counterproductive as it will adversely affect the efficiency of the administration and result in the executive getting bogged down with the non-productive work of collecting and furnishing information. The Act should not be allowed to be misused or abused, to become a tool to obstruct the national development and integration, or to destroy the peace, tranquility and harmony among its citizens. Nor should it be converted into a tool of oppression or intimidation of honest officials striving to do their duty."

This justified treating RTI as an undesirable activity and labelling RTI users as extremists. It

Officer ... is satisfied that the larger public interest justifies the disclosure of such information: Provided that the information, which cannot be denied to the Parliament or a State Legislature shall not be denied to any person."

A simple reading shows that under this clause, 'personal' can be denied if it has apparently no relationship to any public activity or interest; or the disclosure of the said information would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual.

The Court did not rule on whether the information was an outcome of a public activity or if its disclosure would amount to an unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual. It denied the information by reading only the first seven words of the provision and saying it was 'personal information'. Most information can be linked to some person. Realising that it may be difficult for public information officers and other appellate authorities to decide on what constitutes privacy, Parliament gave a simple test in the proviso – the information which would not be denied to Parliament or legislature would not be denied to any person. This can only have one meaning. That anyone claiming that information would be denied to the citizen would make a subjective statement that he would deny the information to Parliament.

It is well settled that literal interpretation should be given to a statute if the same does not lead to absurdity. In *Nasiruddin and others vs Sita Ram Agarwal* (2003) 2 SCC 577, the Court has stated: "37. The court's jurisdiction to interpret a statute can be invoked when the same is ambiguous... It cannot re-write or recast legislation. It is also necessary to determine that



KEY POINTS

The RTI Act empowered citizens to access government information and fight corruption, but its effectiveness has declined due to government resistance, inefficiency in Information Commissions, and restrictive court rulings. Key rulings have limited its scope, especially regarding "personal information." To protect the Act, citizens and media must defend it from further dilution.



The Indian EXPRESS

GS Paper 2-IR

The historic Tea Horse Road, connecting India and China through Tibet

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 24

CHINA'S AMBASSADOR to India Xu Feihong on Sunday posted on X about the historic Tea Horse Road which spanned more than 2,000 km, and connected China to India via Tibet.

"The Ancient Tea-Horse Road witnesses the exchanges and interaction between China and India throughout the long river of history," he wrote.

Although not as well-known as the Silk Road, which linked China and Europe, the Tea Horse Road was a crucial commercial pathway for centuries.

"Tea from across China was transported to Xizang [Tibet], then shipped to Kolkata via the Himalayan passes, and sold in Europe and Asia on a massive scale," the Ambassador wrote.

A network of roads

The Tea Horse Road does not refer to a single road but a network of branching

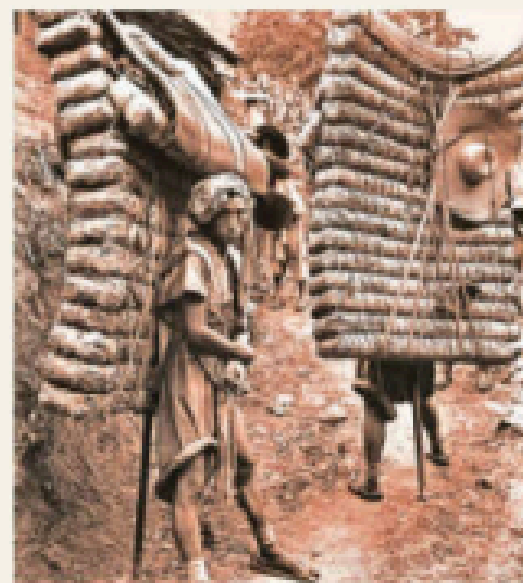
paths that began in southwest China and ended in the Indian subcontinent.

The two main pathways passed through cities like Dali and Lijiang in Yunnan province, reached Lhasa in Tibet, before entering the Indian subcontinent where they branched into present-day India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. These routes were perilous to travel on, passed through difficult terrain, and reached an elevation of up to 10,000 feet.

The origin of the Tea Horse Road can be traced to the rule of the Tang dynasty in China (618-907 CE). The writings of Buddhist monk Yijing (635-713 CE) — who gave some of the most detailed descriptions of Nalanda university available to-

day — mention products like sugar, textiles, and rice noodles being transported from southwestern China to Tibet and India while horses, leather, Tibetan gold, saffron and other medicine herbs went to China. (Shaochen Wang, 'The Protection, Designation and Management of Cultural Routes: A Case Study of the Tea & Horse Road in China', 2021).

Over time, the trade focused on teas and horses, as official documents from the Song



dynasty (960-1279 CE) show.

Tea and horses

The main driver for this is believed to be the demand for tea among Tibetan nomads, living in cold and unforgiving conditions.

As an article in the *National Geographic* put it, "[Tea] was a hot beverage in a cold climate... A cup of yak butter tea — with its dis-



Carrying tea in Sichuan (left), along Tea Horse Road, 1908. *Wikimedia Commons*

tinctive salty, slightly oily, sharp taste — provided a mini-meal for herders warming themselves over yak dung fires in a windswept hinterland."

At the same time, horses were a vital military resource as well as a means for transportation. But the central plains of China did not produce horses, meaning that they had to be imported from neighbour-

ing Tibet and Yunnan.

"The geographical features of the commercial goods tea and horse, in this case, promoted the complementary exchange activities and formed the tea and horse exchange market," Shaochen Wang wrote.

In fact, by the 10th century, official facilities were established along the border counties in China to control and supervise the trade trade. With the rise and fall of kingdoms, trade ebbed and flowed over the next few centuries.

For instance, tea was pressed together and packed into "bricks" — a form of packing that remains popular till date, and was akin to currency in medieval Tibet, scholars say. Meanwhile, sturdy Tibetan steeds became central to China's fights against nomadic tribes from Mongolia, the predecessors of the mighty Genghis Khan.

In modern times

In 1912, as the time of the Qing dynasty came to an end, the Horse Tea Road would continue to remain significant. Domestic "turmoil and foreign aggressions" provided a "unique opportunity for the trading systems

in southwest China", Shaochen Wang wrote.

Through the road, new techniques and goods were brought to the less-developed mountainous regions of Yunnan. Additionally, with China now being in greater contact with the world market, Yunnan's tea industry rapidly expanded.

Later, during World War II, the road played a significant role in transporting supplies to the frontline battlefield in China, with Japan controlling almost all of the Chinese coastline and airspace.

With the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the Tea Horse Road witnessed gradual decline. Most notably, porters who would carry loads of up to 150 kg mostly stopped the backbreaking work following Mao Zedong's land reforms.

Of late, China has promoted tourism along the historic path. Lijiang became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997. The UNESCO website says, "From the 12th century onward, the Old Town of Lijiang was an important goods distribution center for trade between Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet, and is where the Silk Road in the south joins the Ancient Chama (Tea and Horse) Roads."

KEY POINTS

1. The Tea Horse Road, spanning over 2,000 km, connected China to India via Tibet, facilitating the trade of tea and horses for centuries. It was a network of paths through tough terrain, starting from China's southwest to the Indian subcontinent. The trade, crucial since the Tang dynasty, supported Tibet's tea demand and China's need for horses.



Carrying tea in Sichuan (left), along Tea Horse Road, 1908. Wikimedia Commons

The Indian **EXPRESS**

GS Paper 2-IR

What's ailing India's textile industry and govt's attempts to improve competitiveness

AGGAM WALIA

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 24

INDIA'S TEXTILE industry is among the largest in the world, spanning a vast value chain from cotton cultivation to high-end apparel manufacturing. However, despite its scale, India lags behind countries like China, Vietnam, and Bangladesh in textile exports, which benefit from vertically integrated supply chains, lower production costs, and simpler regu-



KEY POINTS

- India's textile industry is one of the largest globally but faces challenges like high production costs, fragmented supply chains, and complex regulations, resulting in sluggish export growth. Despite being a top cotton and fibre producer, India lags behind countries like China and Vietnam. Sustainability pressures are increasing, adding costs, especially for smaller firms





PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



GS Paper 3-Economy



Union Minister Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan to inaugurate the Saras Aajeevika Mela at Noida Haat, Uttar Pradesh tomorrow

Saras Aajeevika Mela aims to help artisans and craftsmen to promote their livelihoods and inclusive growth

Posted On: 24 FEB 2025 6:01PM by PIB Delhi

KEY POINTS

1. The Saras Aajeevika Mela 2025, organized by the Ministry of Rural Development, is being held at Noida Haat from February 21 to March 10, showcasing rural India's crafts, handlooms, and natural food products. Over 450 SHG members from 30 states are participating, with 200 stalls and 25 food stalls offering ethnic goods and cuisines.





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GS Paper2/ 3- IR/Economy



The India-EU Trade and Technology Council first Workshop on Electric Vehicles (EV) Charging Technology paves the way for new advancements in standardisation and sustainable mobility

Posted On: 24 FEB 2025 8:14PM by PIB Delhi

KEY POINTS

- The EU and India are enhancing their partnership through the India-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC). The first India-EU Workshop on Electric Vehicle Charging Technology, held in Pune on February 24, 2025, focused on sustainable transport and standardisation. The TTC, established in 2023, strengthens cooperation on trade, technology, and security, addressing shared global challenges.

