

Commons and Culture

Women lead in conserving tribal culture and forestry

Vanjangi Village, Alluri Sitaram Raju district, Andhra Pradesh

In Vanjangi village, the Center for People's Forestry (CPF) a civil society organization has been working for the conservation of forests, livelihood enhancement, entitlements and facilitated the submission of Community Forest Rights (CFR) claims in the year 2020.

Vanjangi hillock is part of the eastern ghats and is an abundant forest with various NTFP products such as amla, shikakai, karakkai, adda leaf, hill broom, nallajeedi, adapa seeds, and other native plants. Vanjangi and V Kothuru villages are adjoined to this hillock. The region is predominantly inhabited by Bhagata, Kondadora, and Valmiki tribes. Additionally, the Kodu tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), migrated to the area 20 years ago. These communities have been protecting the forest and worshipping their traditional deity **“Bolengammatali”** and sacred groves on the hillock. All the tribals have the tradition of climbing the hillock barefoot. It has a beautiful landscape with white fluffy clouds touching the peaks of the hill.

In recent years, Vanjangi hillock has become a tourist hotspot. Cashing on the influx of tourists, tin shed homestays have been erected to cater to the needs of tourists disregarding environmental concerns.

Anganaini Shanthakumari, a tribal woman from Vanjangi village expressed her concern about the lack of sensitivity amongst the tourists, “I was disturbed by the tourists, throwing plastic bottles, food & other waste all over the place, also damaging their contour crop cultivation and showing disregard for our sacred space.” This was echoed by other tribals from Vanjangi and V.Kothuru a neighboring village. In response, CPF had several interactions with the community to protect the forest and their culture.

With the idea of initiating a traditional & cultural centre, a dialogue emerged in the community on their ways of constructing traditional dwellings, tribal musical instruments, agriculture implements & crops, hunting equipment, traditional utensils, forest produce, and herbal plants.

The establishment of the **“Adivasi Cultural Knowledge Centre”** emerged as an outcome of these consultations and discussions. The land (4.6 cents) for the center was given by Ms. *Anganaini Shanthakumari*, motivated by a desire to preserve her community's culture and traditions. The center aims to engage young tourists and college students, offering them an opportunity to learn about the forest, cultural practices, and indigenous knowledge of the tribal communities and their way of life.

A set of guidelines has been implemented to ensure the sanctity of the centre and respect for the local community. A set of guidelines (Do's and Don'ts) has been established for Vanjangi tourists. To ensure a respectful and harmonious experience at Vanjangi's sacred forest hillock, tourists are encouraged to maintain silence and seek blessings from local

deities. Observing nature without disrupting the ecosystem is essential. Visitors should avoid littering, damaging property, disturbing wildlife, and engaging in disrespectful behavior, including consuming alcohol, as these actions can disrespect the sacred environment. By following these guidelines, tourists can enjoy a meaningful, spiritually enriching experience while supporting the preservation of Adivasi heritage and fostering harmony with the local community.

The community built this centre to reflect their culture, and traditional architecture using mud/lime, bamboo, and grass (sabbagaffi, Koperu), which had to be procured from far away villages to maintain authenticity. The circular shaped mud structure was designed to ensure the overview of all the artifacts displayed. Kodus, the PVTG community who settled in Vanjangi village, only knew about constructing these mud houses while other tribals have lost this knowledge. An eight-member Management Committee has been formed to oversee the construction and management of the center from Vanjangi and neighboring V. Kothuru village.

Officially opened on 16th July 2024 by the esteemed District Collector, Sri **A S Dinesh Kumar IAS**, this center embodies a commitment to preserving and revitalizing the rich cultural fabric of the region's indigenous communities. Dedicated to safeguarding age-old traditions, the center celebrates every aspect of Adivasi life—from their food culture and traditional arts to music, festivals, and ancestral knowledge which was a collective effort from community members.

The Centre is now managed by a group of 25 women from Vanjangi. It has become the heart of the village, offering space for cultural exchange, promoting traditional crafts, and providing educational programs.

The Centre aims to conduct:

- Educational programs for school children on tribal heritage.
- Theater workshops for youth on culture and environment.
- Exhibitions of Adivasi arts, crafts, and food.
- Celebrations of tribal festivals.
- Training for women on forest products and millet-based food sales.
- Workshops on vermicomposting and organic pellets.
- Documentation of forest produce and medicinal plants.

The Centre exemplifies the power of community-led initiatives in preserving commons, cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable livelihoods. By empowering women and involving the broader community, the Centre is protecting the traditions of the Vanjangi tribe while fostering economic opportunities through education, crafts, and sustainable practices. The collaboration between Anganaini Shanthakumari, the local women, and CPF underscores the potential of cultural conservation to drive sustainable development and environmental stewardship, creating new pathways for both cultural and economic growth.

Photos



Media Coverage

THE HINDU
Visakhapatnam

Tribals open centre at Vanjangi to showcase their tradition, culture to tourists

It is constructed from locally sourced materials and walls are painted with mural art representing the lives of tribals; the centre will be run by 30 tribal women, says the project coordinator

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It is a kind of a blend of tribals from Vanjangi with the part of the Centre for Tribal Welfare (CTW) from Vanjangi. The Centre is established near the Vanjangi village. The centre was constructed with...



...of locally sourced materials like mud, bamboo, wood, grass and mud. The walls are painted with...



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