

This Indian activist says its time to use indigenous knowledge in the fight against climate change

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- Indigenous researcher and youth activist Archana Soreng is working alongside six other youth advisers to offer fresh perspectives into battling climate change.
- Archana was selected for her work in indigenous communities and explains these tribes have been practicing sustainable living since the 'time of our ancestors.'

Indigenous researcher and youth activist Archana Soreng first heard the term "climate change" only a few years ago. But she quickly understood that India's tribal communities have been living a climate-friendly lifestyle for generations.

"During my field visits and interactions with the tribes, I realised that concepts ... (such as) green living, rain water harvesting, reducing carbon emission and organic farming are actually being practiced since the time of our ancestors," she said.

"The modern world is basically 'hijacking' these age-old indigenous practices and principles, in its fight against climate change. So why not give the tribal communities their due credit" - and a bigger leadership role in dealing with climate threats, she asked.

Soreng, 24, a member of the Kharia tribe from the remote village of Bihabandh in India's Odisha state, in late July was selected as one of seven [youth advisors on climate action](#) to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

He said he hoped the new panel of 18 to 28-year-olds would "provide perspectives, ideas and solutions that will help us scale up climate action".

Selwin Hart, a U.N. special advisor on climate action, said Soreng "was selected due to her strong work in advocacy and research, (and) in preserving and promoting the traditional knowledge and cultural practices of indigenous communities".

A heavy price

Soreng, in an interview with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, said indigenous communities were already among those hardest hit by worsening climate-related threats and problems, from extreme weather to deforestation.

Since she was young, she said, [strong cyclones have repeatedly hit her state](#), with families losing their homes and assets. By the time they recover, she said, another storm comes along.

"Why do the least-polluting tribal communities have to pay such a heavy price?" she asked.

In Soreng's family, activism and tribal ties run deep. Her mother Usha Kerketta is a teacher and women's right activist in her village. Nabor Soreng, her uncle and the first literate member of the family, is a tribal leader and indigenous studies expert.

Since childhood, they said, Soreng has been interested in tribal issues and environmental challenges. In recent years she has documented the practices and traditional wisdom of Indian tribal and forest groups such as the Paudi Bhuiyan, Juang, Dongria Kondh, Oraon, Santhalis, Ho and her own Kharia tribe.

The effort has aimed not just to help preserve the knowledge but try to see it spread - and to instill greater pride in local the traditional communities, said Soreng, who studied regulatory governance at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and now is a researcher with Vasundhara, an Odisha non-profit focused on the rights, livelihoods and culture of indigenous communities.

As the world battles plastic pollution, for instance, it could learn from indigenous communities that have long used alternatives to plastic, from biodegradable plates made from leaves to toothbrushes of Neem tree twigs or date palm, she said.

Tribal communities need to become entrepreneurs in fighting climate change, she said, creating businesses that bring them an income and cut out the middle men and private companies that usually usurp their ideas and potential profits.

"I want to act as a bridge between the indigenous communities and policy makers in this regard," she said.



Taken seriously

Her foray into climate activism began about five years ago when she joined a university movement for tribal people. Last year she represented India at a Geneva meeting of the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR).

She is also a member of the climate secretariat's youth constituency, and has been part of a youth caucus on desertification and land use.

She said it was "exhilarating" to have been chosen for the U.N. secretary-general's youth group, but she also saw it as "a huge responsibility".

"As a member of this international climate forum I will emphasise and propagate the indigenous traditional practices, wisdom and ways of life as sustainable solutions to the growing climate crises," she said, as well as trying to engage more indigenous youth in climate action.

Planet-heating emissions are still rising, however, despite [the growth of a global youth activist movement](#) that brought millions to the streets last year.

That has raised questions about whether global leaders are ready to listen to young people and act more swiftly on the climate risks that will fall hardest on them.

Soreng believes they are. The decision to create the youth panel she's joined "shows that young voices are being taken seriously to accelerate global action and tackle the worsening climate crisis", she said.

Social media has helped young people amplify their voices, and many are today more informed, aware and mature on the issues, she added.

But youth input into decision-making needs to be continuous and sustained for long-term impact, she said, and youth groups need to join forces with like-minded others to have real impact.

Soreng's uncle, the tribal leader, believes his niece will have a key role in making that happen.

"I am sure she will connect the local with the global, thus helping the world at large to tackle the climate crisis," he said.

Source: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/young-activist-aims-to-bring-indias-tribal-wisdom-to-the-climate-fight/>