CoFTI
Coalition for Food-Systems Transforma(c)tion in India

APRIL 2026

ISSUE BRIEF

FOOD NARRATIVES, BROKEN ECOLOGIES, AND JUST FOOD FUTURES

SHALINI BHUTANI, SHATAKSHI SRIVASTAVA,
ANSHUMAN DAS & DR. ANITA PINHEIRO



german cooperation
DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

Implemented by
giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

WELT HUNGER HILFE
WHH
For a world without hunger

food future foundation

WASSAN

FOOD NARRATIVES, BROKEN ECOLOGIES, AND JUST FOOD FUTURES

Some rights are reserved. This work is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Under the terms of this licence, you may copy, redistribute, and adapt the work for non-commercial purposes, provided appropriate credit is given, a link to the licence is provided, and any changes made are indicated. Use of logos are not permitted.

This material is published in English. Translated versions may be produced for wider access; however, CoFTI cannot ensure the accuracy of these translations.

Third-party materials:
Those interested in reusing content from this work that is attributed to third parties—such as tables, figures, or images—are encouraged to check whether permission is required and, where needed, to seek it from the relevant copyright holder. Responsibility for ensuring appropriate use of third-party content lies with the user.

If you adapt the work, you must license your contributions under the same or equivalent licence. You may use the following citation to give credit.

Bhutani, Shalini, Shatakshi Srivastava, Anshuman Das, and Anita Pinheiro. 2026. *Food Narratives, Broken Ecologies and Just Food Futures*. Issue brief. New Delhi: CoFTI Secretariat.

Author affiliations:
Shalini Bhutani - Law and Policy Analyst
Shatakshi Srivastava - Jawaharlal Nehru University
Anshuman Das - Welthungerhilfe India
Dr. Anita Pinheiro - Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN)

General disclaimers
The names used and the way locations are presented in this publication do not imply any opinion on the part of the CoFTI Secretariat. Similarly, the views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the CoFTI Secretariat.

While care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the information presented, it is provided without any guarantee, either expressed or implied. The interpretation and use of the material remain the responsibility of the reader.

CoFTI Secretariat,
WASSAN - Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (https://www.wassan.org)

Website URL:
CoFTI - Coalition for Food-Systems Transforma(c)tion in India (https://www.cofti.org)

Cover Photograph:
Priyamvada Kowshik

Cover Photo:
Women continue to play a vital role in last-mile distribution, bringing fresh catch directly to communities. Photo taken from Shirali, Uttara Kannada

Designed by:
Nemani Chandrasekhar (Watershed Support Services and Activities Network - WASSAN)

Edited by:
Dr. Anita Pinheiro, CoFTI Secretariat, Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN)

About CoFTI

The **Coalition for Food-Systems Transforma(c)tion in India (CoFTI)** was born out of the United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit 2021 with a commitment to reshaping India's food system so that safe and nutritious food is accessible to all. Its mission addresses hunger and malnutrition while championing biodiversity, climate resilience, and the protection of livelihoods. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, CoFTI works to create sustainable and equitable solutions that balance the needs of people, planet, and economy. Grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Coalition drives positive change across seven key areas of work, ensuring that India's food systems remain resilient for both present and future generations.

CoFTI's approach is anchored in **three core objectives**.

1 **THOUGHT LEADERSHIP**	**USING RESEARCH, INNOVATION, AND EVIDENCE-BASED INSIGHTS TO SHAPE EFFECTIVE POLICIES AND GUIDE THEIR IMPLEMENTATION.**
2 **COLLECTIVE ACTION**	**OFFERING A COLLABORATIVE SPACE WHERE STAKEHOLDERS CAN UNITE, SHARE RESOURCES, AND WORK TOGETHER ACROSS ITS AREAS OF FOCUS.**
3 **BUILDING CONNECTIONS**	**FOSTERING STRONG LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS TO ENABLE THE EXCHANGE OF KNOWLEDGE AND STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS**

Through these objectives, CoFTI serves as both a catalyst and a convener, ensuring that India's journey towards a just, sustainable, and nourishing food future is grounded in shared purpose and actionable solutions.

CoFTI Core Group comprises of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Welthungerhilfe India (WHH), Food Future Foundation (FFF), and Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), which hosts the Secretariat of CoFTI.

The CoFTI Fellowship Programme

The CoFTI Fellowship Programme (2025) was conceptualized to nurture early-career researchers in India by supporting them to explore and generate evidence on critical food systems issues. Designed as a structured three-month fellowship, it combined rigorous selection, thematic focus, and a mentorship model curated, hosted and implemented by CoFTI Secretariat with support from WASSAN and Welthungerhilfe (WHH) India. Through guided research and collaborative knowledge creation, the programme culminated in the Fellows producing six working papers, an Issue Brief, and a detailed survey-based analytical report.

The CoFTI Fellowship Programme was carried out from August to November 2025 followed by a rigorous process of review and finalisation of the outputs. Applications were invited from early career researchers for specific thematic areas identified through consultations with CoFTI members. The programme received nearly 500 applications from which eight fellows were selected by a panel including the CoFTI Core group members and other subject experts who are also members of the Coalition. A team of subject experts was invited to mentor the Fellows. The CoFTI Fellows received an honorarium to support their research during the Fellowship, and the final topics were decided jointly by the Fellows and their assigned mentors.

Of the eight fellows selected, seven successfully completed the CoFTI Fellowship programme. Five Fellows undertook original research projects from conceptualisation to manuscript preparation, while two contributed to the development of a CoFTI Issue Brief and a survey-based analytical report.

Voluntary mentorship by CoFTI members: A defining feature of the fellowship was its mentorship model. Members of CoFTI, Core Group, and the Secretariat have voluntarily mentored the fellows throughout the programme.

The fellowship culminated in the presentation of findings, followed by review, revision, and publication as part of the CoFTI Working Paper Series, with opportunities for further research collaboration and publication.

The CoFTI Secretariat was responsible for the overall design and coordination of the Fellowship programme. This included developing the fellowship framework, managing the selection process, facilitating mentor–fellow engagement, and coordinating the review, editing, design, publication, and communication of the Fellows' outputs. As the institutional anchor of the Secretariat, WASSAN also played a significant role in the operational management and smooth implementation of the fellowship programme by providing administrative, human resource, and design support, which was instrumental in ensuring the effective delivery of the programme.

Acknowledgements

This issue brief, Food Narratives, Broken Ecologies, and Just Food Futures, is an outcome of a workshop of the same name convened by the CoFTI Secretariat on June 19, 2025 in New Delhi, India. The workshop brought together a diverse group of practitioners, researchers, and champions to reflect on the intersections of food systems, ecological sustainability, and justice. It is their own voices that the recommendations section seeks to echo.

Three of the authors of this brief - Shalini Bhutani, Anshuman Das, and Dr. Anita Pinheiro were engaged with the workshop from its conceptualisation and also served in different roles during the convening. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the panelists and participants, whose insights and reflections were instrumental in shaping this brief.

We extend our sincere thanks to Dr. Richa Kumar, Salome Yesudas, Sudha Nagavarapu, Aruna Tirkey, Ramesh Bhatti, Dr. Sanchita Das, Dr. Sony R.K., Jaisreekumar V, and Deep Jyoti Sonu for their valuable inputs and contributions as panel members, moderators, or facilitators. We further acknowledge the contributions of other members of the CoFTI Action Lab on Rural Food Environments, particularly Usha Soolapani, in conceptualising the workshop, which informed and contributed to the development of this issue brief. While this brief draws on the collective discussions from the Food Narrative workshop, the views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of all participants or partner organisations.

We also gratefully recognise the overall support provided by the CoFTI Core Group members - Nadine Bader, Neha Khara, Alok Dubey, Avani Verma, Parul Thapa, Philippe Dresruesse, Nivedita Varshneya, and Shantanu Garg - for the enabling environment that facilitated both the organisation of the workshop and the development of this issue brief.

We are grateful to Priyamvada Kowshik, Team Lead of CoFTI Secretariat, for her sustained support throughout the CoFTI Fellowship Programme and development of this Issue Brief.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to other members of the CoFTI Secretariat - Jyoti Prasad, Pallavi Shankar, Dinesh Balam, and Jitendra Kar - for their support.

We thank the CoFTI Fellowship Programme for supporting Shatakshi Srivastava’s contribution in the writing of this issue brief.

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to WASSAN (Watershed Support Services and Activities Network) for hosting the CofTI Fellowship Program and providing the necessary organisational framework to support the development of this Issue Brief.

The second author also extends her appreciation to fellow CoFTI Fellows, for their valuable discussions and shared reflections that helped her overall understanding on food systems. The second author is also grateful to her friends and family for their constant encouragement and support throughout this journey.

We also extend our sincere gratitude to Nemani Chandrasekhar for his thoughtful and creative design contributions, which have enhanced the presentation and overall quality of this Working Paper.

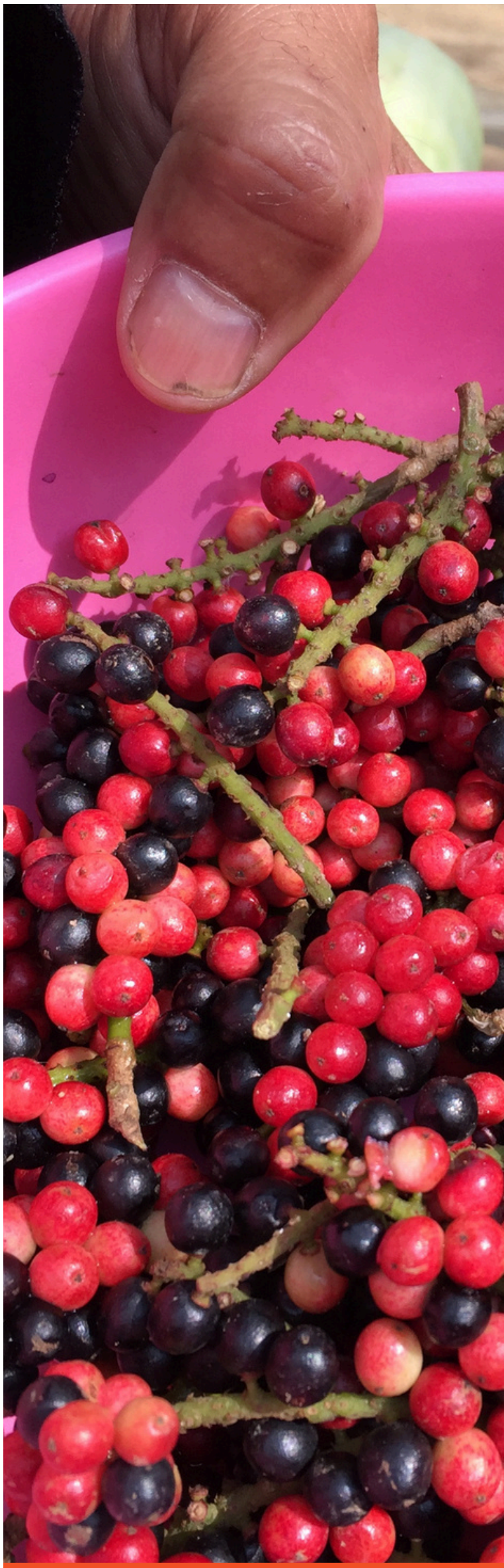
Shalini Bhutani
Shatakshi Srivastava
Anshuman Das
Dr. Anita Pinheiro

Index

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
1. INTRODUCTION	2
2. BACKGROUND: BROKEN ECOLOGIES AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES	3
3. SECTORAL IMPACTS ON DIVERSE AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS	4
◦ CROP PRODUCERS	4
◦ PASTORAL COMMUNITIES	5
◦ COASTAL COMMUNITIES	6
◦ TRIBAL COMMUNITIES	7
4. PATHWAYS TO JUST FOOD FUTURES	9
5. RECOMMENDATIONS	10
◦ CROSS-CUTTINGS	10
◦ CROP PRODUCERS	10
◦ TRIBAL COMMUNITIES	10
◦ PASTORAL COMMUNITIES	11
◦ COASTAL COMMUNITIES	11
6. CONCLUSIONS	12
7. REFERENCES	13

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BDA	Biological Diversity Act
CFR	Community Forest Resource (CFR)
CoFTI	Coalition for Food Systems Transforma(c)tion in India
CRZ	Coastal Regulation Zone
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FFF	Food Future Foundation
FPO	Farmer Producer Organisation
FRA	Forest Rights Act
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GPDP	Gram Panchayat Development Plan
HLPE-FSN	High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services Scheme
IFR	Individual Forest Rights
IYoM	International Year of Millets
MSP	Minimum Support Price
NITI	National Institute for Transforming India
PDS	Public Distribution System
POSHAN	Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SSFP	Small-scale Food Producer
UN	United Nations
WASSAN	Watershed Support Services and Activities Network
WHH	Welthungerhilfe



WILD BERRIES

Photo credits: Salome Yesudas

Executive Summary

The issue brief aims to reinvigorate conversations around food systems by drawing attention to the role of food narratives, i.e., the cultural and political stories that dictate how we think about food, nutrition, and sustainability. It seeks to engage a wider audience in rethinking the relationships among food, ecology, and justice.

It introduces the idea of broken ecologies in describing the widening disconnect between communities and the ecosystems that sustain them. This brief argues that contemporary food system breakdowns are not about scarcity or technology, but about deeper structural fractures within our food systems.

Focus and Approach:

This analysis draws on the discussions from the CoFTI workshop of the same name held in June 2025 to develop a standalone knowledge product that integrates perspectives on ecology, social concerns, and food cultures. It draws from the lived experiences of agrarian, pastoral, tribal, and coastal communities to illustrate how food systems and environmental change intersect.

Key Insights:

1. The dominant narrative of food as a commodity is contributing to the mainstream market-oriented production and homogenisation of diets eroding traditional, biodiverse foodways.
2. Food security approaches should go beyond calorie-based approaches to recognise nutrition, ecology, and cultural diversity as interlinked dimensions.
3. Local and community-based knowledge systems remain central to imagining more just and resilient food futures.

One such vision of just food futures re-embeds food within its ecological and cultural contexts; frameworks for this type of approach are agroecology and food sovereignty, among others. In these approaches, diversity, resilience, and justice will have priority over profit and productivity.

Broad suggestions for policy and practice

1. Strengthen biodiversity governance and community custodianship of local food sources;
2. Ensure inclusion of local producers, as valid stakeholders and holders of food wisdom and knowledge;
3. Ensure participation especially of women, in food system designing and decision-making;
4. Reframe food security to incorporate ecological and cultural well-being; and
5. Align future food policies with just transitions principles that combine sustainability with equity.

The issue brief argues that reimagining India's food systems requires restoring relationships among people, food, and ecology. Building just food futures means recognition that the health of communities is inseparable from that of ecosystems, and that food narratives are also narratives of justice and survival.

1
Introduction

Food narratives are the "stories" that frame how we understand, value, and organise food systems and play a decisive role in shaping whose knowledge counts, what practices are legitimised, and which foods appear in supply chains and finally on the plate. They open possibilities while also constraining imagination, elevating certain voices while silencing others. Narratives determine what is considered a "problem" in food systems, how solutions are framed, and whose knowledge and values are treated as authoritative. The vulnerabilities faced by agrarian, tribal, pastoral, and coastal communities in our country are not only ecological and economic, but they also shape narratives about how food systems should be, influencing the very culture surrounding food.

The world's food systems today are failing to deliver on the promise of food security and nutrition for all (FAO, 2019a). In 2023, 735 million people faced hunger, representing an increase of over 122 million from 2019, while almost 30 per cent of the world's population experienced moderate to severe food insecurity (FAO, 2023). Despite technological progress, these crises coexist with ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity, all intensified by climate change (IPCC, 2022). India mirrors this global paradox. Though it occupies just 2.4 per cent of global land area, it hosts 7–8 per cent of recorded species and spans 10 biogeographic and 15 agroclimatic zones, supporting immense diversity in crops, forests, livestock, and aquatic systems (MoEFCC, 2020). Yet this ecological abundance now faces acute stress from overexploitation, groundwater depletion, and land-use change. These ecological and social inequalities intersect along lines of class, caste, and gender, compounding vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1991; Agarwal, 2018).

Under the contemporary global paradigm of development, the dominant narrative has been one of economic growth, free enterprise, and globalisation, which treats food primarily as a tradable commodity. This extractive framing has produced "industrial food systems" prioritising yield, profit, and efficiency, built on monocultures, mechanisation, and chemical intensification (Anderson, 2021). The promise that these systems would "feed the world" has proven hollow when examining the experience of developing nations like ours. In India, these industrial food systems have produced a homogenisation that has taken distinct forms across communities. For agrarian households, it comes through the loss of seed sovereignty and dependence on purchased inputs for agricultural production. For tribal peoples, it manifests as the stigmatisation of forest foods as "backward," producing food shame and dietary decline. For pastoralists, it takes the form of redirection toward standardised dairy and poultry chains that weaken indigenous breeds and women's roles. For coastal fishers, it appears in the erosion of artisanal rice–fish and small-scale marine foodways in favour of export-oriented aquaculture and mechanised fleets. What unites these shifts is the reduction of diverse, ecologically embedded food practices into a narrow, standardised food plate aligned with industrial and corporate priorities.

Reimagining just food futures for India, therefore, requires revisiting dominant narratives and looking beyond technological or market-based solutions to the structural conditions that shape how food is produced, distributed, and valued. The crises unfolding across agrarian, tribal, pastoral, and coastal regions are not isolated or accidental; they stem from a gradual severing of the relationships between communities and the ecologies that sustain them. As landscapes, livelihoods, and local food cultures become disembedded from their ecological contexts, the material and cultural foundations of India's diverse food systems begin to fracture.

It is this deep, interlinked process of ecological and social disconnection that scholars and practitioners have described as the emergence of "broken ecologies."

Drawing on the deliberations of the CoFTI workshop "Food Narratives, Broken Ecologies and Just Food Futures" (June 2025), this issue brief explores how food narratives intersect with ecological and social inequalities across four key sectoral groups that are crop producers, tribal communities, pastoralists, and coastal populations and envisions pathways toward regenerative, just, and inclusive food systems. The next section examines how these broken ecologies have taken shape in India and how they continue to reproduce inequalities across food-producing communities.

2

Background: Broken Ecologies and Structural Inequalities

The idea of broken ecologies captures the interconnected social and environmental ruptures that occur when patterns of economic growth and development separate people from the ecosystems that sustain them. These fractures are not only ecological, such as soil degradation, biodiversity loss, or falling water tables, but also social, as they weaken communal access and management needs, local governance systems, and food cultures (FAO, 2021). Dominant food narratives that emphasise productivity, efficiency, and market integration often treat these disruptions as technical issues rather than as the result of deeper inequalities and exclusion (Scoones et al., 2020).

The Green Revolution marked a turning point in India's food security strategy. It achieved national grain sufficiency but relied on resource-intensive cultivation of rice and wheat, leading to soil degradation, groundwater depletion, and the narrowing of agricultural diversity. As a result, traditional crops such as millets declined sharply from 37 per cent of total cereal area in the 1960s to less than 10 per cent by 2018 (FAO, 2023). Recognising these consequences, India has increasingly aligned with global efforts to transform food systems. In partnership with the UN, the NITI Aayog has signed instruments to promote the diversification of food baskets, the linking of agriculture with nutrition, and the revival of climate-resilient and nutritious crops through the International Year of Millets (IYoM) in 2023. State programmes such as Odisha's *Shree Anna Abhiyan* (formerly known as Odisha Millet Mission) and Andhra Pradesh's Community-Managed Natural Farming are notable examples of these emerging efforts.

While these initiatives mark an important shift, there remains a need to take these measures to the last mile. Agrarian, *Adivasi* and forest-dependent, pastoral, and coastal communities need to be fully recognised as central stakeholders in food policy and praxis. Their voices and lived knowledge can help shape the design of future strategies for resilient and equitable food systems. The next section discusses how broken ecologies affect these communities in practice.

3

Sectoral Impacts on Diverse Agrifood Systems

The structural drivers of ecological breakdown outlined above take on concrete forms in the lives of specific communities. Crop producers, tribal groups, pastoralists, and coastal populations are not only the stewards of biodiversity and traditional foodways but also the first to experience the rupture of broken ecologies. Their experiences underscore how marginality is shaped at the intersection of ecological change, institutional neglect, and unequal power dynamics.

CROP PRODUCERS

India's agrarian ecologies today bear the brunt of decades of resource-intensive farming that has undermined soil health, fresh and groundwater levels, and biodiversity. This is evidenced by the *National Compilation on Dynamic Ground Water Resources of India (CGWB, 2024)*, which finds that over 14 per cent of India's administrative units are in critical or overexploited categories, with nearly 17 per cent of recharge-worthy land under severe stress, largely in Green Revolution regions, linking intensive irrigation to groundwater depletion. This ecological strain is also evidenced by the disappearance of indigenous food grains and local vegetables, marking a sharp erosion of agrobiodiversity.



WOMEN FROM UPLAND VILLAGES IN GOA TRAVEL TO WORK AS AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN PADDY FIELDS. CURTORIM, GOA.

Photo Credit: Priyamvada Kowshik

Policy measures such as minimum support price (MSP) and government procurement of food grains have incentivised the expansion of rice–wheat systems, often at the expense of millets and pulses (Kumar, 2023). These shifts have narrowed diets, reduced resilience, and contributed to micronutrient deficiencies (Kumar et al., 2020). Heavy fertiliser and pesticide use has degraded soils, polluted ecosystems, and exposed farm workers to health risks, while rising input costs continue to squeeze smallholder incomes (Veluguri *et al.*, 2019).

The burdens of this ecological exhaustion are unevenly distributed. Corporate consolidation of seeds, backed by intellectual property regimes, undermines farmer sovereignty and erodes collective traditions of seed saving (Bhutani, 2016). Agricultural labourers, particularly Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, remain landless and insecure. Women, who constitute the majority of the agricultural workforce, are often not even recognised as "farmers" and face lower wages, invisibility, and structural exclusion from land and credit (Kumar *et al.,* 2020). Thus, the agrifood system reflects both ecological breakdown and entrenched social inequities.

PASTORAL COMMUNITIES

According to an earlier study, India has about 10 million pastoralists who sustain mobile livestock systems that nurture almost half the goats and three-quarters of the sheep worldwide, while preserving more than 40 per cent of India's native breeds (Sharma et al., 2003). Official data usually clubs nomadic, semi-nomadic, transhumant, and sedentary pastoralists together. Their inputs and knowledge continue to be marginalised in policy and government statistics. Their grazing grasslands are often classified as "wastelands" in official records and subsequently diverted for industrial uses, development projects, and plantations, affecting migration routes and access to fodder (Madhusudan & Vanak, 2023).



A FLOCK OF SHEEP HERDED BY RABARI PASTORALISTS
IN KACHCHH DISTRICT-GUJARAT

Photo Credit: Sahjeevan Archival

Cooperative dairying increased the incomes of livestock keepers during the White Revolution period, but the subsequent penetration of agribusiness into dairy and poultry has put small producers into wage-like supply chains, usually at a trade-off in their herd diversity and autonomy (Singla & Singh, 2025). Concurrently, invasive weeds like Prosopis and Lantana, and dwindling commons have diminished grazing opportunities (Jodha, 2000).

There are limited legal provisions that offer protection to pastoral communities. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), 2006, envisions the inclusion of pastoral communities and is supposed to protect grazing access and community resource use. However, recognition is especially difficult for nomadic pastoralists. Migration routes usually bisect districts and even states, complicating mapping and registration of claims. Overlap in the use of natural resources with sedentary agricultural societies further complicates recognition, resulting in widespread non-recognition of Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights. Under the FRA, to date, fewer than 3 per cent of possible CFR claims have materialised nationally, and compensatory afforestation schemes remain an impediment to migration routes.

The Biological Diversity Act (BDA) 2002 acknowledges the role of pastoralists as keepers of animal diversity, but its implementation in states has focused more on the documentation of domesticated stocks and breeds of animals. With declining herd numbers and youth fleeing herding, iconic breeds like the camel, Banni buffalo, and Tharparkar sheep suffer genetic erosion. Loss of commons and disregard for pastoral livelihood systems jeopardise livelihoods but also endanger ecological function and nutritional contributions provided by pastoral food systems.

COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Spanning across 7,500 kilometres, India's coastline supports millions of shoreside and sea-based livelihoods and a variety of foodways through fishing, farming, and aquatic trade. These ecologies, as diverse as mangroves, estuaries, wetlands, and coral reefs, anchor both cultural identity and food security. Today, they are under acute stress. Sea-level rise, saltwater contamination, and more frequent cyclones push settlements away and decrease farm productivity. The Sundarbans could lose about 80 per cent of its mangroves over this century, which is an alarming indication of how the collapse of biodiversity erodes natural buffers that are critical for food resilience.



ARTISANAL FISHERFOLK SORTING THE CATCH AT SHIRALI, UTTARA KANNADA

Photo Credit: Priyamvada Kowshik

Protection regulations have also tilted in favour of large commercial interests. The Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, progressively diluted over successive amendments, has increasingly reduced protection to ecologically sensitive locations (Dhar, 2019; Rao Mazumdar, 2017). Environmental Impact Assessments may bypass substantive consultation to accommodate large infrastructure and industrial projects to proceed despite their ecological and societal effects. (Rao et al., 2018) Recent conflicts, such as the Worli fishing grounds land reclamation in Mumbai, illustrate that fisher livelihoods are often compromised by urbanisation (Wagh Indorewala, 2025).

These ecological fractures for coastal communities directly erode their food systems and warrant a transformative policy response. Indigenous agro-ecological practices that ensure climate resilience and biodiversity maintenance are in decline with pollution, land clearing, and institutional abandonment. Further, women, being at the core of post-harvest processes, vending, and adaptation measures, remain alienated from fisheries' governance decisions. This gendered exclusion masks their contribution to coastal foodways' sustenance and undermines their knowledge and labour-led resilience strategies.

TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

For India's nearly 100 million tribal people (Census of India, 2011), forests are their source of food, identity, and culture. Their conventional diets have historically depended on shifting cultivation and uncultivated foods like wild tubers, greens, fruits, fish, and game. These foods supported both nutrition and agrobiodiversity in their food systems (FAO, 2023). However, extractive development has continuously displaced people at record sizes: while representing just 8.6 per cent of the population, Scheduled Tribes represented over 40 per cent of people forcibly displaced by dams, mining, and industrial projects (Kumar et al., 2020).

Deforestation and displacement erode access to forest produce, while climate change disrupts rainfall patterns and increases forest fires, further reducing non-timber forest products that constitute the basis of tribal diets. Loss of forest ecosystems also accompanies cultural erosion: industrialisation produces "food shame" for children of tribes, who eschew their traditional diets, while "forgotten foods" get delisted from local agri-horti-ecologies. Large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects have raised concerns about potential impacts on local ecologies and food systems in recent times.



FARMERS SELLING THEIR SMALL PRODUCE OF TUBERS AND ROOT VEGETABLES ON A HIGHWAY IN KARNATAKA

Photo Credit: Priyamvada Kowshik



TRIBAL POTLUCK AT THE BIODIVERSITY FESTIVAL ORGANISED BY NORTH EAST NETWORK AT CHIZAMI VILLAGE, PHEK DISTRICT, NAGALAND

Photo Credit: Priyamvada Kowshik

Large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects have raised concerns about potential impacts on local ecologies and food systems in recent times. In several such cases, the application of the UN principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) remains limited, affecting the ability of tribal communities to participate fully in decisions concerning their traditional lands and resources.

The FRA represents an important step in recognising the rights of Adivasi and forest-dependent communities over land and forest resources. While legal recognition has expanded, implementation remains gradual, especially with respect to CFR rights. Administrative and procedural requirements have slowed progress, and enforcement mechanisms for access to minor forest produce, fishing areas, and seasonal foraging continue to evolve. In several areas, recognition of community entitlements has progressed relatively slower than individual claims. The FRA is still largely approached within a land tenure framework, rather than as part of a wider effort toward food and ecological security. The Tribal Sub-Plan remains a key mechanism for focused development in tribal regions, though funding constraints have limited its overall reach and impact (Alha & Garwa, 2025).

The effects on local communities together show how deteriorating environments perpetuate marginalisation of agrarian, pastoral, coastal, and indigenous communities. Each of these communities experiences unique vulnerabilities, but they are connected by shared challenges, including extractivism, degradation of environments, and erosion of indigenous and localised systems of food and nutrition. It is essential to grasp these lived experiences because they shed light on not only material deprivation but shifting culture and narrative that alter perceived food value. The following section explores how we can imagine just food futures for these key sectoral groups.

4

Pathways to Just Food Futures

A just food future envisions a food system that ensures healthy, culturally appropriate food; recognises the needs and contributions of food producers; values ecological integrity; and distributes power, resources and decision-making equitably. In this sense, it is as much about justice as it is about sustainability. In the context of food systems transformation literature, there is a wide array of proposed solutions like climate-smart agriculture, sustainable intensification, biofortification, and organic farming. However, most of these remain technocratic responses embedded in the same extractive paradigm, seldom challenging the structural causes of ecological degradation and marginality (Montenegro de Wit, 2021). Agroecology, by contrast, represents a holistic paradigm shift. It integrates ecological principles with social justice, centering producers and communities in food system transformation. It is not simply a set of practices but a framework that re-embeds food in ecological processes, culture, and collective values (FAO, 2018).

The FAO's *10 Elements of Agroecology*, born out of decades of farmer movements and scientific participation (FAO, 2019), are interconnected principles: diversity, synergies, efficiency, resilience, recycling, co-creation and sharing of knowledge, human and social values, culture and food traditions, responsible governance, and circular and solidarity economies. This has further been expanded and granulated to 13 principles of agrecology by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE-FSN). These elements together shift attention from yield to resilience, from inputs to ecological cycles, and from market logic to human well-being. Movements such as *La Vía Campesina* articulate just food futures as those rooted in food sovereignty, feminist economies of care, and youth-led transformation. Their vision places women and young people at the centre of rebuilding food systems that are cooperative, reciprocal, and grounded in dignity and autonomy rather than profit. These articulations expand the meaning of agroecology from ecological sustainability to social and gender justice, reaffirming its relevance for building equitable food systems in India and beyond.



WILD EDIBLE FOOD
Photo Credit: Salome Yesudas

5 Recommendations

The re-imagining of India's food systems means departing from technocratic fixes in favour of justice-oriented reforms to transcend ecological destruction and entrenched marginalities. The following recommendations on agrarian, tribal, pastoral, and coastal systems build on workshop discussions.

CROSS-CUTTING

1. **STRENGTHEN BIODIVERSITY GOVERNANCE:** Enforce the BDA to operationalise benefit-sharing with communities conserving genetic or biological materials/resources. This includes creating mechanisms for transparent compensation, legal recognition of community seed banks and custodianship of traditional breeds, and institutional support for community-led biodiversity monitoring. Biodiversity governance should also actively support intergenerational knowledge transfer, ensuring that local ecological expertise informs local and national conservation strategies.
2. **LOCAL PEOPLE AS STAKEHOLDERS / DECENTRALISATION:** Make it routine to bring farmers, fishers, pastoralists, and tribals into decision-making processes in agriculture, forest, coastal and biodiversity policy. Strengthen the role of Gram Sabhas in active decision-making, and emphasise the importance of participatory, multisectoral Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs) in shaping locally grounded and inclusive outcomes.
3. **GENDERED AND PARTICIPATORY APPROACH:** Recognise that women play central, yet often undervalued, roles in food systems from seed saving and soil management to post-harvest processing (including in fisheries) and community food governance. Policies should go beyond simple participation quotas to leverage women's ecological and agricultural knowledge in decision-making, research, and implementation. This includes supporting participatory crop research and local processing initiatives, ensuring that their expertise directly shapes sustainable and culturally rooted food systems.
4. **RE-VISUALISING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY**: Reframe food security to include cultural and environmental concerns in addition to calorie concerns. Incorporate these perspectives into the agricultural and food policy, so that local food producers have both agency and capacity to design their food systems.
5. **JUST FOOD FUTURES ALIGNED WITH JUST TRANSITION:** Ensure that food systems reforms are both socially equitable and ecologically regenerative. Policies should support a transition away from extractive industrial agriculture and towards local, low-input, diverse, and climate-resilient food systems. This transition must centre the livelihoods and needs of marginalised producers, while providing social protection and investment for communities historically excluded from decision-making.

CROP PRODUCERS

1. Adopt MSP reforms using the Swaminathan Commission's C2+50 per cent formula to ensure equitable return to small-scale food producers (SSFPs).
2. Support low-input diversified farming systems through support for soil health programmes and participatory research.
3. Scale up and scale out farmer/fisher Producer Organisations (FPOs) through public investment to increase bargaining power and secure better price realisation for SSFPs.
4. Lifting of the rice–wheat monoculture by promotion of diversified local staples (millets, pulses, tubers, small fish, etc.) through MSP. Invest in decentralised, women-centred processing centres.
5. Facilitate the restoration and revival of India's rich seed diversity and traditional crops appropriate to diverse local agroecologies. For example, support to community seed banks of minor millets in Chhattisgarh state.

TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

1. Protect both CFR and Individual forest Rights (IFR) under FRA, integrate them into forest governance and prevent any diversions to other projects in the absence of Gram Sabha consent.
2. Revive "forgotten foods" and non-cultivated types through seed libraries and incorporate into Public Distribution System (PDS) or *Mission Saksham Anganwadi* and POSHAN 2.0 (formerly known as Integrated Child Development Services Scheme-ICDS).

Encourage and support the celebration of tribal food festivals, for not just the tribal communities themselves, but also as a means to build a wider understanding of their nature-positive, climate resilient and biodiverse food cultures.

PASTORAL COMMUNITIES

1. Revitalise the FRA to incorporate grazing routes and mobility corridors, and address overlaps with settled agriculture.
2. Redesignate grasslands as valuable ecosystems instead of "wastelands" and avoid diverting to industry. Rajasthani commons management is an exemplar in how to conserve grazing lands.
3. Facilitate pastoralists with *in situ* conservation of their landscapes through the Biological Diversity Act as custodians of traditional breeds linking conservation to livelihoods.

COASTAL COMMUNITIES

1. Make the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) framework fisher-friendly by prioritising access for artisanal fishers to landing sites, estuaries, and mangroves. The Kerala fisher cooperatives are amongst the best examples of community management of the seas.
2. Support restoration of traditional coastal agro-ecological systems where cropping and fishing work in synergy with each other, like rice–fish systems of *Pokkali* (Kerala), *Kaipad* (Kerala), and *Khasan* (Goa) as climate adaptation measures.
3. Recognise women's engagement in fish processing and vending in fishery-related policies to achieve balanced market and infrastructure access.



A FLOCK OF SHEEP HERDED BY RABARI PASTORALISTS IN KACHCHH DISTRICT, GUJARAT

Photo Credit: Sahjeevan Archive

6 Conclusions

Building just food futures in India requires re-imagining food systems as ecological, cultural and social relationships rather than simple production and large-scale distribution channels. The experiences of agrarian, tribal, pastoral and coastal communities show that today's food crises arise not from technological gaps, but from broken ecologies that disrupt connections between people and the environments that support their livelihoods, knowledge and food cultures. Technical solutions on their own cannot repair these underlying issues. Instead, transformative pathways must place the needs, knowledge and agency of food-producing communities at the centre, while restoring biodiversity, strengthening local governance and challenging the narratives that have normalised ecological decline and the loss of diversity. Approaches such as agroecology and food sovereignty illustrate how resilience, justice and cultural rootedness can guide this transition. A just food future ultimately requires that food policy be aligned with lived community realities and recognises ecological well-being and social equity as inseparable foundations of sustainable food systems.



A FISHERWOMAN SELLS DRIED FISH AT A LOCAL VILLAGE MARKET ON THE GUJARAT–MAHARASHTRA COAST

Photo Credit: Priyamvada Kowshik

7
References

ActionAid. (2014). Crisis Of Commons: The Erosion Of Grazing Lands And Pastoral Livelihoods In India. Actionaid India.

Agarwal, B. (2018). Gender Equality, Food Security And The Sustainable Development Goals. Current Opinion In Environmental Sustainability, 34, 26–32. Https://Doi.Org/10.1016/J.Cosust.2018.07.002

Alha, A., & Garwa, S. (2025). A tale of Two Sub-Plans. Economic and Political Weekly, 60(24).https://doi.org/10.71279/epw.v60i24.39075

Bavinck, M. (2014). Fishing Futures: The Commons and Coastal Communities in South India. Oxford University Press.

Bezner Kerr, R., Hickey, C., Lupafya, E., & Dakishoni, L. (2022). Agroecology and climate change adaptation in Malawi. Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems, 37(3), 295–307. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742170519000390

Bhutani, S. (2015). Copyrights for Farmers: Role of Agricultural Intermediaries. Economic and Political Weekly, 18-20.

Bhutani, S. (2016). Two Countries, One Corporation and Its Intellectual Property Rights. Economic and Political Weekly, 16-18.

Birner, R. (2011). The Political Economy Of Agricultural Policy Reform In India: Fertilisers And Electricity For Irrigation. Ifpri Research Report.

Central Ground Water Board. (2024). National Compilation On Dynamic Groundwater Resources Of India, 2024. In National Compilation On Dynamic Ground Water Resources Of India [Report].

Chatterjee, S., et al. (2024). The Role Of Farm Subsidies In Changing India's Water Footprint. Humanities And Social Sciences Communications, 11, 284. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02801-1

Consultation on Forest Rights Act and Rights of Pastoralists. (2017). Centre for Pastoralism. https://centreforpastoralism.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/FRA_Consultation_Report-2017.pdf

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Das, A., & Swain, P. K. (2024). Navigating The Sea Level Rise: Exploring The Interplay Of Climate Change, Sea Level Rise, And Coastal Communities In India. Environmental Monitoring And Assessment, 196(11). Https://Doi.Org/10.1007/S10661-024-13191-Z

Dhar, P. (2019). Carving Out The Coasts. Economic And Political Weekly, 54(3). Https://Www.Epw.In/Journal/2019/3/Editorials/Carving-Out-Coasts.Html

D'souza, R. (2014). Pastoralism In A Changing World: Patterns Of Adaptation And Transformation. Economic & Political Weekly, 49(26–27), 64–73.

Escobar, A. (2018). Designs For The Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, And The Making Of Worlds. Duke University Press.
Fact-Finding Committee. (2024). Report On The Implementation Of The Forest Rights Act, 2006.

FAO. (2018). The 10 Elements Of Agroecology: Guiding The Transition To Sustainable Food And Agricultural Systems. Food And Agriculture Organisation Of The United Nations.

FAO. (2019). The State Of The World's Biodiversity For Food And Agriculture (J. Bélanger & D. Pilling, Eds.). Food And Agriculture Organisation Of The United Nations.

FAO. (2021). Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems: Insights On Sustainability And Resilience From The Front Lines Of Climate Change. Food And Agriculture Organisation Of The United Nations.

FAO (2019). The State Of Food And Agriculture In The World: Moving Forward On Food Loss And Waste Reduction. In Www.Fao.Org. Https://Www.Fao.Org/Interactive/State-Of-Food-Agriculture/2019/En/

FAO (2023).The State Of Food Security And Nutrition In The World 2023. Food And Agriculture Organisation Of The United Nations.
Gupta, P., & Singh, S. (2021). Minimum Support Prices In India: Distilling The Facts. Ieg Working Paper.

IPCC. (2022). Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation And Vulnerability. Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change.
Kumar, R., Agarwal, N., Vijayshankar, P. S., & Vasav, A. R. (2020). State Of Rural And Agrarian India Report 2020. Nras. Http://Www.Ruralagrarianstudies.Org/State-Of-Rural-And-Agrarian-India-Report-2020/

Kumar, R. (2023). Degrowth, Diversity And Decentralisation: Building Sustainable Food Systems For Food And Nutrition Security. In Reimagining Prosperity Social And Economic Development In Post-Covid India (Pp. 171–187). Https://Doi.Org/10.1007/978-981-19-7177-8_10

La Via Campesina. (2025, June 18). About La Via Campesina. La Via Campesina. Https://Viacampesina.Org/En/
Ministry Of Environment, Forest And Climate Change (Moefcc). (2020). India: Third National Biodiversity Action Plan – Addendum 2020. Government Of India.

Montenegro De Wit, M. (2021). Decolonial Agroecologies: Hunger, Sovereignty And Development In India. Journal Of Peasant Studies, 48(4), 789–811.

Neogi, S., Et Al. (2022). Evaluation Of Crop Diversification On Indian Farming Systems. Sustainability, 14(24), 16861. Https://Doi.Org/10.3390/Su142416861

Patel, R., & Moore, J. W. (2017). A History Of The World In Seven Cheap Things: A Guide To Capitalism, Nature, And The Future Of The Planet. Verso.
Pingali, P., Aiyar, A., Abraham, M., & Rahman, A. (2019). Transforming Food Systems For A Rising India (P. 368). Springer Nature.

Rao, A. R., & Mazumdar, A. (2017). Coastal Commons: A Glimpse Into The Nature And Significance Of Coastal Commons Spaces And Resources. In Https://Dakshin.Org/. Dakshin Foundation. Https://Dakshin.Org/Wp-Content/Uploads/2018/05/Dakshin-2009-Fisher-Bill-Critique_policy-Brief-Compressed.Pdf

Rao, A. R., Mazumdar, A., & Viswanadhan, K. (2017). Coastal Commons: A Glance At Relevant Laws. In Https://Dakshin.Org/. Dakshin Foundation. Https://Dakshin.Org/Wp-Content/Uploads/2018/05/Dakshin-2009-Fisher-Bill-Critique_policy-Brief-Compressed.Pdf

Reis-Filho, J. A., Et Al. (2024). Navigating Blue Justice: Policy Gaps And Conflicts In Coastal Territories. One Earth, 7(10), 1264–1276.
Rodell, Matthew, Isabella Velicogna E James S. Famiglietti. 2009. "Satellite-Based Estimates of Schreiber, M. A., Et Al. (2022). Blue Justice And The Co-Production Of Hermeneutical Resources. Marine Policy, 139, 105013.

Scoones, I., Et Al. (2020). Transforming Food Systems Under Climate Change. Cgiar Research Program On Climate Change, Agriculture And Food Security (Ccafs).

Sharma, V.P., & Köhler-Rollefson, I. (2003). Pastoralism In India: A Scoping Study.

Shiva, V. (2016). Who Really Feeds The World? The Failures Of Agribusiness And The Promise Of Agroecology. North Atlantic Books.

Sundar, N. (2016). The Burning Forest: India's War In Bastar. Juggernaut

Ton, G., Et Al. (2017). The Effectiveness Of Contract Farming In Improving Smallholder Incomes: A Systematic Review. 3ie Systematic Review 38.

Wagh, S., & Indorewala, H. (2025). Red 2024-(Wl 6336)-A Road To Coastal Deregulation: The Worli Fishing Zone Dispute. Economic And Political Weekly/Economic & Political Weekly, 60(2). Https://Doi.Org/10.71279/Epw.V60i2.4273

APRIL 2026
ISSUE BRIEF

FOOD NARRATIVES, BROKEN ECOLOGIES, AND JUST FOOD FUTURES



MILLETS AT THE COMMUNITY SEED BANK MANAGED BY WOMEN OF CHIZAMI VILLAGE, PHEK DISTRICT, NAGALAND

Photo Credit: Priyamvada Kowshik

COALITION FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMA(C)TION IN INDIA

CoFTI is supported by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation (BMZ). The CoFTI Secretariat is managed by Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN).

You can reach us at
coftisec@wassan.org

FOLLOW US FOR UPDATES ON SOCIAL MEDIA