Stilt-walking a facet of human evolution in forests

It may have been used by tribal ancestors to avoid diseases during monsoon

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No one is certain about the time when stilt-walking, an indigenous means of avoiding diseases during monsoon, turned into a sport for aboriginal children in the erstwhile undivided Adilabad district. But its importance to the ethnic people cannot be ruled out as it denotes the evolution of their lifestyle in the forests.

Stilt-walking is part of the religious culture of Raj Gond, Pardhan and Kolam tribes living in the deep forests and their children play with bamboo stilts during the Gondi month of Pola, which roughly coincides with August. Stilts, called khodang in Gondi, are made of freshly-cut bamboo on the new moon day and after performing puja to the sticks, children are allowed to use them.

The sport ends on the day of pola festival that takes place on the day following the new moon. The villagers offer prayers to Siva Auwal, the mother goddess, before discarding the khodang.

“It rains heavily in August and walking on stilts helps children wade through slush easily and thereby avoid diseases. The khodang are still relevant given the slushy surroundings,” said Kinaka Sambhu, a Raj Gond elder from Valgonda in Indervelli mandal.

It is quite evident that the tradition of walking on stilts is a result of humans coming to understand their surroundings. “Yes, it is possible that the necessity to cross swollen streams and avoid slush may have been felt by our forefathers,” Mr. Sambhu agreed even as he conceded that there is no one who has proper knowledge about it.

The Adivasis have also made bamboo a part of their tradition not just in finding ways and means to put the woody tropical grass to make items used in their daily life. Bamboo has been elevated to a semi sacred status, especially in the ethos of the clannish Raj Gonds. The four clans that constitute this tribe in the erstwhile Adilabad district are denoted by the number of gods that they consider as their progenitors. For instance, the patel or village headman or any other dignitary in the clan which has four gods as progenitors carries a bamboo stick with four nodes, and so on.