By anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan’s definition, societies go through stages of savagery, barbarism and civilisation. And civilised societies are those which have achieved “cultural and technological development”.

As a doctor and new Indian Police Service officer who has travelled across India, I thought I had a clear idea of the three stages, but my posting in Tuensang district of Nagaland has turned into an unlearning experience for me.

Four major tribes – Chang, Sangtam, Khiamniungan and Yimchunger – live in Tuensang, the largest and eastern-most district of the State, on the Myanmar border. On my first day in the job, everyone told me to watch out for inter-tribal clashes and take up the challenge of backwardness. I started wondering why the three stages did not progress in this beautiful land. The tribal people have, however, augmented my understanding of civilisation with their organic way of living with minimal wastage of resources.

In today’s world, where a person does not know even his or her neighbour, society in Tuensang, divided into villages with headmen, gathers every member of each house to stand together in times of need or danger. I wondered why the three stages did not progress in this beautiful land. The tribal people have, however, augmented my understanding of civilisation with their organic way of living with minimal wastage of resources.

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Tuensang’s teachings

With their strong community bonds, tribes in a Nagaland district set an example for ‘civilised’ societies

To start with, at least know your neighbour and develop a sense of community bonhomie

PRITPAL KAUR

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In today’s world, where a person does not know even his or her neighbour, society in Tuensang, divided into villages with headmen, gathers every member of each house to stand together in times of need or danger. I knew the latest storm was strong enough to test my patience in the pitch-dark jungles.

The next morning, a whole town with every villager, council, church and union turned up for the search. They were from all tribes, not just the children’s, breaking our prejudice that inter-tribal rivalry may obstruct our efforts. Those eyes filled with determination gave me new hope that a needle can be found in a haystack. We formed small teams to visit all jungles and farms.

Slash-and-burn fields, which I had only read about in books, was today my work field. The Naga teams would whistle to communicate that one hilltop had been searched, and we could move to another. It dawned on me that despite scientific advancements, the modern world needed this way of living – every hand, ear, eye and voice of every person used to find two children.

Their sounds and knowledge of echo points were no less sophisticated than any modern communication mode. As the sun set, the second day of our search was over. The people, however, became more active than tired. As we walked about 8 km on a hilltop dropping down to a scary valley, suddenly there was a collective sigh of relief. The children were spotted eating peas and playing in a farm hut.

Gandhiji said that “strength doesn’t come from physical capacity; it comes from an indomitable will”. The will to help each other, togetherness and fraternity won the heart of everyone standing there.

The tribal people have not erected the fence of individualism and portray a model of community living. Let us learn from these northeast societies. To start with, at least know your neighbour and develop a sense of community bonhomie.