

# Women-Lores from India's Pits

A quarterly e-newsletter



## **We Are The Real Ecologists**

In this edition of the newsletter, we bring to you some captivating insights and reflections from a recent workshop centered around biodiversity and the traditional wisdom of Adivasi women.

From the fascinating forest walks that unveiled the lesser-known medicinal properties of plants and trees, to the mouthwatering recipes passed down through generations -- through this newsletter, we hope to honour and amplify the cultural richness of Adivasi communities and their understanding of the interconnection between humans and nature.

## Women Assert their Barefoot Ecological Knowledge

A five-day exchange programme with Adivasi women on traditional knowledge and biodiversity led to a rich cross learning and reflection by women from five states - Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka. They came together to share their knowledge of biodiversity in their forests and how women engage with their resources for food, medicine and spirituality. They conversed through forest walks, cooking, sharing recipes, sharing information on how they prepare medicines from the diverse flora and even fauna. They talked about the relationship between *gotras* and plants, animals and their significance to human relationships and festivals.

*Knowledge sharing  
on traditional  
medicinal herbs  
and plants*



It was fascinating to recollect their grandmothers' remedies. They recollected the aromas and flavours of the culinary delicacies that were once experienced and that they still wished to cook and taste but some are forgotten recipes.

Forgotten more because forest landscapes have been invaded by outsiders, development projects, and degraded for non-forestry activities. Where practices are more vibrant, it is because adivasis have been more fortunate to have their access to forests with limited intrusion from the outside. The women discovered that they had similar species but with different names and uses, or other species but having similar uses.





**Biodiversity walk in Panna forest**, led by Nirmala Kerketta, who practises traditional healing with her native wisdom. She believes that *“dharti mein jitney bhi ped-paudhe, ghaas-paat hai, sab aushadhi hain”* (all the trees, plants, grass and leaves present on earth are medicines). She adds that this earth is not only for humans, it is also housed by plants and animals, insects and microorganisms with which we all share a relationship.

*The walk began at the Mahua tree which symbolises Adivasi identity and which the women worship and use in many ways for their food and medicines.*



*While Gajar Ghaas is used for cancer treatment, Doodh Ghaas helps cure stomach ache and vomiting by grinding the latex that comes out of the plant.*

*Cheel Chitti is a plant considered sacred and is used in many rituals and ceremonies.*

*Bariyaari Ghaas is used to terminate unwanted pregnancies.*

*Akwand and Koraiyya keep blood sugar levels in control in addition to the former's flowers which are brewed with pepper and jaggery, to act as a cure for dog bites.*

*The thorny and poisonous Dhatura was spotted in the walk and was described as a pain killer but also warned as so addictive that it drives a person crazy. It is used to make bhaang, a drink made from the narcotic cannabis plant.*

And many such conversations were shared and resources identified. And many drew inspiration from each other to go back to their forests to regenerate and restore their traditional species.



*Identifying medicinal properties of plants during the biodiversity walk*





## Women Challenged the Reductionist Development Approaches to Adivasis, their Identities and Rights to Protect their Forest Knowledge

The exchange gave space for women to share their problems and challenges they face everyday when they go into the forest. For instance, their axes and sickles get snatched away from them when they go into the forest for wild food and firewood, and they exclaimed “*arey kulhadi toh humari jaan hai*” (the axe is our life). The axe is not used to destroy but to survive -for their food, housing, fuelwood - none of which, the women claimed, brings destruction to the forest.

Women who came from the degraded stone mines of **Vidisha** recollected that they once had some of these flora but the depletion of groundwater and slashing down of forests for indiscriminate mining has made the species extinct. Their seasonal cooking no longer allows this luxury. Their common ailments need to be attended to, off the counter than from the forest.

*Piles of stone at a plot adjacent to a stone quarry in Vidisha's Ganj Basoda*



*A stone mine in Vidisha*



In **Panna**, women till recently cooked and collected these, but restrictions of entry into the tiger reserve have quickly forced them to change from diverse seasonal wild food to the current monotony of watery dal and single roti - TB, Silicosis and malnourishment among a community that had a rich knowledge of wild food.

In **Chatra**, women shared their woes about losing their land for land banks and infrastructure projects and how this is affecting their access to forest resources and with this, their right to practise their forest based knowledge.

In **Chhattisgarh**, concerns regarding elephant attacks whose corridors have been disrupted by innumerable infrastructure projects, was a major concern for women, as their entire year's crops are trampled over, houses gutted and even humans attacked by these starving tuskers. Both animals and adivasis are losing their forests and their access to food, so women in Chattisgarh shared how they are protecting their community forests.

Women who came from the degraded iron-ore mines in **Karnataka** were fascinated by the rich knowledge that forest dwelling communities are abundantly blessed with.

*An iron ore mine  
in Karnataka*



## What should a Forest Policy look like: Women Chart the way

From the women's perspective, forests should be prioritised for women's basic activities like collecting food, firewood, gathering non-timber forest produce for livelihood, grazing cattle and other critical needs for human subsistence. These are not activities that degrade forests. These make Adivasi women key stakeholders in natural resource governance which includes claiming ownership of land, gaining and disseminating knowledge on biodiversity and forest produce and transmitting their traditional practices intergenerationally enhancing their well-being. It is also important for reclaiming their identity as the external economics that intersect with gender, caste and tribe in many negative ways for private profits are exacerbating the marginalisation of women.

Therefore, there was unanimity in the women discussing the need for their entitlements to forest lands under the FRA and their customary practices. The women agreed that their communities had vast knowledge of their forests and their survival depends on these resources. Hence, "*nahi chhodenge*" (we will not leave) was their strong conviction when it comes to their entitlements to the forest.

They exchanged information on how each of their groups are making efforts to help women put up claims to their forest rights and how they are mapping their forest resources. Discussing the progress of their claims under the FRA, women learnt how to demonstrate their customary knowledge of their biodiversity to the outside world.



*Demonstration of the Effects of Land Grabbing and Disenfranchisement of Forest Rights*





### Biodiversity and Resource Mapping:

With the facilitation of Durga Karadi from Udaipur, the women shared their ideas: It began with a *nazariya naksha* where the women laid out key locations, boundaries, resources and infrastructure in their village and their forests. They made a list of the resources in different categories that they customarily categorise and discussed how these registers could be used for claiming their community rights.



Community  
resource mapping  
by women





Forests are thus a source of enormous nutritional wealth and contain plants with healing properties. The session on medicinal herbs and their ability to combat diseases made the women renew their zeal to build awareness of the forgotten recipes and remedies from the forest that were so easily accessible to them. The importance of women's recognition of their own knowledge and reassertion of their entitlements to these resources was taken home by all. Particularly, as women are battling with TB and malnutrition and other debilitating health problems which are not getting attention from public health systems, the conversations around strategising for barefoot community health and ecological protection became a focus for collective work. They discussed how they could bring women together in their own communities to actively use their knowledge for their nutrition and health.

Some women took back seeds, some saplings and all went away with their shared experience of co-existence in the forest.

### A Traditional Recipe Shared:

#### *Mahua ka Achaar*

**Ingredients** - Mahua - 1 kg, Mustard oil - 1 kg, Salt - 10 g, Fenugreek - 100 g, Mustard - 100 g, Mangraila (Nigella seed) - 100 g, Cumin - 100 g, Turmeric - 250 g, Ajwain (Carom seeds) - 100 g, Garlic - 250 g, Ginger - 250 g, Green chilli - 250 g, Beetroot - 250 g, Carrot - 250 g, Kashmiri chilli - 250 g, Vinegar - 100 g, Asafoetida - 10 g

#### **Method**

Mahua is first washed and dried. It is fried until it turns slightly red in mustard oil and then removed. For taste, carrot, beetroot, garlic, green chilli are fried till they turn slightly red and cooled down. For the pickle masala, fenugreek, mustard, asafoetida, cumin, Kashmiri chilli are ground and roasted in the hot oil and then cooled down. The fried Mahua, vegetable mixture and pickle masala are mixed and stored in a jar after cooling it down.

*Preparation  
for  
Mahua ka  
achaar*



This newsletter is primarily intended as an information platform for groups working on the ground to exchange news and stories from mining affected communities. We invite contributions from communities and local groups. We also encourage young and barefoot researchers to join us in compiling stories and data. You can send your photos and stories in any Indian languages.

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