

Project Update: July 2009

The project started with a meeting in Tissa in the second week of May, where we (Khemraj and me) finalised the checklists for selection of villages, formation of user groups and micro plan formulation and plan the activities to be carried out in the next three months. We planned to finish micro plan process at least in two villages before the onset of monsoon in the middle of June, which is the only planting season for NTFPs of this area.

Identification and Selection of Villages for NTFP initiative

Selection of suitable villages for NTFP initiative was one of the foremost considerations of this intervention. We decided to visit as many areas as possible before making any final selection in order to identify all areas which have suitable micro climatic conditions for the plantation of the selected NTFPs. A map of the Tisa sub-division was prepared, and all such areas were marked on it with the help of the local people who are well versed with the area. Effort was made to assess the different areas on the basis of three critical elements which are important for success of our intervention:

1. Community need for conservation and replenishment of NTFPs
2. The selected user groups having some exclusive forest usage area (as in case of multiple village use of the selected areas, there are high chances of conflicts and disagreement among villages which are very difficult to resolve in absence of any credible framework for conflict resolution)
3. Agreement of the general house and representatives of the concerned Panchyat (local self governance unit) which would provide sanctity to the intervention

To assess the areas on the above-mentioned points; we talked and interviewed individual community members, NTFP traders, panchayat representatives, wherever possible met women's groups and collected revenue and forest record from the government departments.

We identified five areas i.e. Seikothi, Gulei, Hail-Teppa, Jhajjakothe and Guwadi suitable based upon micro climatic conditions and people's willingness to take up such intervention in their area. Out of these five areas selected the Guwadi area because of its accessibility (near Tissa town) and having five villages in one cluster to work with. The villages selected were Pugthala, Chulhan, Bharog, Dabhu and Banyot.

Awareness and confidence building exercise in the selected villages

Preliminary meetings: We conducted preliminary meetings in all five villages where we briefed the villagers about the current intervention and how it could succeed like the ongoing intervention in Kut-Butoa. These initial meetings were attended mostly by male members. Being a patriarchal society, the dealing with outsiders is done by male head of the family.

Exposure visit to Kut-Butoa: The objective of this exposure was to make the people of Guwadi area aware about the ongoing NTFP initiative in Kut-Butoa and to provide them an opportunity to learn from the experiences of the people there. This was a one-day exposure visit attended by forty-two people from five villages - almost one member from each family of the villages. The residents of Kut-Butoa shared their experiences in detail and women members of Kut-Butoa user group showed them their plantation areas and shared their experiences regarding protection and management practices followed by them.

Feedback meetings: The exposure visit has helped in building an understanding amongst the people of Guwadi area with respect to the viability and future scope of the initiative and there was a positive response from all five villages that showed confidence and enthusiasm to take up similar initiatives in their villages. A dialogue was carried out in these villages with the objective of bringing about a realization among male members that the women are main stakeholders and primary user of forest resources near the villages and without their consent and involvement any initiative in these areas cannot sustain in the long run. The decision to carry out household surveys was also taken with the group for building our own understanding regarding the resource dependence, economic status and obtain the response of each household on the new initiative, especially that of the women.

Micro plan Formulation

Household and Socio-economic survey: The number of households in a village ranges from 10 to 12 out of which almost 50% are seasonal residents (mainly women members whereas man stay back in permanent residence) from nearby Khushnagri panchayat. These families have agriculture land and come here to graze their cattle in summers.

Other important information obtained from the survey was on “extraction of NTFPs from wild.” Less than five years ago, more than half of the cash needs used to be come from the sale of NTFPs like *Valeriana jatamansi* Jones. and *Dioscorea deltoidea* extracted from nearby forests. Over a period of time, heavy extraction caused degradation, and this became an unviable economic activity. As a result, the villagers started shifting to other cash generating activities like plantation of apple orchards which needs huge open tracts of lands under private control. This in turn has led to their encroaching upon dense fir forests and drying up of the trees by removing their barks.

Meeting on formation of village committee and its norm: These meeting was carried out in three villages i.e. Pugthala, Chulhan and Bharoga. It was decided that being small in size, all the adult members of the villages shall be the members of the village body and all decisions will be taken in the general house only and that there was no need for having any executive committee. In these meetings, where both women and men were present the plot for regeneration work was selected unanimously.

The need to prepare a plan and formulate some rules and regulation on protection and management of planted NTFPs was discussed.

Vegetation survey: A participatory vegetation survey was carried out in Chulhan and Pugthala villages using the quadrant method to study the vegetation types and suitability of factors for the regeneration of NTFPs. The Valerian plants were found to exist in very low density (total 23 plants registered in ten 1meter² quadrants in Pugthala and 9 plants in 10 quadrants in Chulhan). However, the very presence of naturally occurring Valerian indicates suitable micro climatic condition for its regeneration.

Focus group meetings: In the household surveys two groups i.e. women and seasonal residents were identified for whom conducting focus group was felt necessary. In Pugthala it was found that people did not want any new enclosures but wanted to regenerate NTFPs in the plantation areas already enclosed by the Forest Department. This would help in strengthening the protection regime for the area where broad leaf tree plantation had been carried out through the government initiative. In these meetings, the women drew a social and resource map of the village and marked the activities they wanted to carry out.

Final Meeting on finalization of Micro plan: Till date, final meeting to consolidate the NTFP management plans has been done in Pugthala village. In this meeting the socio-economic and vegetation survey results were presented to the village along with the plan prepared in the focus group meeting. All members discussed and added irrigation development facility to promote floriculture activity in the plan and formulated rules and regulation for the management and protection of the NTFPs to be planted - they placed provision for imposing a fine on anyone damaging the plantation, the quantum of which shall be decided according to damage by the general house of the forest user group. Subsequently, a basic memorandum of agreement was signed according to which Lok Vigyan Kendra (represented by Khemraj and me) would support the NTFP plantation and nursery development activities while the forest user group shall take the responsibility of protection and management. They also committed to dovetail the other activities in the management micro plan with those that are to be proposed under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

Plan for next quarter

1. Micro planning exercise and other exercises to be carried out for the rest of the villages.
2. Undertaking plantation of NTFPs in three villages, in case the area has a normal monsoon (this year monsoon is weak and has arrived later than usual)
3. Nursery training to the community members selected by the general house of the user groups
4. Initiate nursery preparation work
5. Visit to other institutes/organisations working on similar issues to develop an understanding on community led management mechanisms for NTFPs



Left: Five villages selected for NTFP work (from right Pugthala, Chulhan, Bharoga, Dabbu and Banyot).
Right: Drying *Pinus wallichia* (Blue Pine) trees to make an open area for apple orchards in Tisa area.



Left: Village meetings during vegetation survey in Pugthala. Right: Meeting on social and resource mapping in village Bharoga.



Participants on an exposure visit to Kut-Butoa