

Kashmir Fellowships: Promoting Livelihoods and Protecting the Environment

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Dr. Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, a physician by training, was deeply moved by the poverty he witnessed across Kashmir while working with a mobile medical clinic. In 2014, he left the practice of medicine and dedicated himself to the upliftment of the people of Kashmir. IFA's support for Dr. Rasool began that same year and has grown to support 7 Fellows in the region that drive the commensurate expansion in scope and breadth of initiatives since inception. The work has persisted despite challenges stemming from regional political instability, impacts of Covid, and loss of Internet connectivity following the abrogation of Article 370 etc.

Key goals

- Tosa Maidan Liberation and Rehabilitation including Community Driven Adventure and Rural Tourism (CDART)
- Conservation of the Environment through Plantation Drives and other means
- Livelihood Preservation (Wular Lake)
- Preservation of Forests and other Natural Resources through Implementation of the Forest Rights Act ("FRA" Act)
- Raising awareness of the Right to Information Act ("RTI" Act) and providing training in how to file appeals

Challenges continue to be extreme gender gaps with no education and work opportunities for women, corporate interests displacing the rights of indigenous communities, political unrest leading to lack of trust in the Government, and the ravages of the pandemic.

Tosa Maidan:

Initial work focused on liberating the picturesque meadow Tosa Maidan from being used as a firing range by the Indian army and then rehabilitating residents of the 52 villages surrounding the Maidan. The work has since spread to include a large area of Jammu and Kashmir as well as Ladakh. This population largely consists of tribal people, many being forest dwellers and nomadic tribes. A broad spectrum of initiatives targets critical areas such as education of children, promotion of local economy through CDART, tree plantation drives to restore forests depleted by firing range practices, nature conservation education, vocational training for women and youth, raising of awareness of government schemes (MGNREGA etc.), fighting corruption through RTI, and protection of indigenous forest rights through a coalition among others.

Wular Lake:

The Wular Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Asia includes about 70 villages with majority of the population being fishers. Since the liberation of Tosa Maidan, work has focused on livelihood generation, raising awareness among the people of the Forest Rights Act, environment conservation, education of children, and promotion of local self-governance. The group is working to protect the livelihoods of the local communities including about 15,000 fishers thus staving off the competing commercial interests of several large corporations who have entered the fray. Key activities are driving education and unionization of fishers at the village, block, and district level and promoting efforts to link to a national fisheries initiative sponsored by ICAN and another IFA supported NGO, Disha.

Adventure and Rural Tourism: Government finances additional infrastructure building costs in 2022

16 villages were declared by the Government as Rural Tourism villages during 2022. When a village is declared a Rural Tourism Village, the Government develops the infrastructure in that village to support tourism. Any group of local citizens that joins the Government's initiative to create infrastructure receives Rs. 10 lakhs to develop that infrastructure. An additional grant of Rs. 1 lakh is given by the Government to families that want to offer their homes for visiting tourists to stay but need additional funding to upgrade their homes to provide reasonable comfort for tourists.



Tourists pause for a moment during a bike trek through the strikingly scenic Kashmir Valley – photo taken in Sukhnag



Tourists enjoying a picnic on the grounds of Tosa Maidan. It is now 8 years since the local community has had access to Tosa Maidan to promote tourism and for use as grazing grounds for sheep

Tosa Maidan: Accomplishments during 2022

An additional 2,000 families have revived their pastoral practice in 2022 ever since Tosa Maidan became freely available as a grazing ground for livestock. Tourism has increased significantly with more than 60,000 families now earning a livelihood directly or indirectly through the surge in tourism. During 2022, 300+ trekker groups, averaging about 20 people, were hosted by the local community. Locals who benefited directly from tourism were the guides, ponywallas, food sellers and transporters such as cab drivers. The 8-year anniversary of Tosa Maidan being returned to the local community was celebrated on August 26th, 2022. See photograph above. The extension of the home stay scheme to Tosa Maidan in 2022 enabled more than 500 home-stays in this area.

Conservation: Plantation Drives continue in 2022 and build momentum

The School for Rural Development and Environment (SRDE) continued to hold plantation drives in 2022 – one was held in Mujipathri, Budgam. After the completion of this drive, follow-up meetings were held with the Sarpanch and other community stakeholders to drive home the importance of tree planting for healing of the environment and to request their active cooperation in this initiative.



A plantation initiative in progress



Taking advantage of World Environment Day to underscore the importance of planting more trees

Forest Rights for the Forest Dwellers

Securing rights under the FRA is now a major goal of Dr. Shaikh and his colleagues. It has become critical due to the push for major development in the area that is disenfranchising the mostly SC and ST forest dwellers and is also leading to massive environmental damage with fast degradation and loss of forests and other natural resources. They have conducted over 15 awareness campaigns and have put together the Forest Rights Coalition – J&K that brings together 9 groups representing various NGOs and indigenous peoples' organizations.

The photograph on the right shows an awareness campaign in progress.



The Forest Rights Campaigns: A 2022 Success Story to report from Tral

In Tral, about 1,000 tribal families were given an ultimatum by the Forest Department to leave the land that had been in their families for over 300 years. The tribals approached the Forest Rights Coalition – J&K, which organized a strong protest before the District Administration. The eviction order was reversed. Land-claims, with appropriate supporting documentation were filed with the District Administration and are now being reviewed for final approval.

Right to Information (RTI) Accomplishments in 2022

SRDE filed 65 RTI Appeals and 11 First Appeals, seeking information on work performed and asking for an accounting of how resources were utilized. This year's accomplishment carried forward the energy from the previous year.

A significant accomplishment in 2022 was the launch of a new RTI related initiative - the Saturday Legal Clinic. As the name indicates, it operates weekly on Saturday and serves two major functions:

1. to train students in the process of filing RTI appeals and the navigation of the system once the appeal has been filed. More than 90 students were trained in the process of filing RTI appeals during 2022.
2. to answer questions from people who have already filed an RTI appeal and need guidance to progress their appeal through the system. This is a great service to people who need active guidance with bringing their case to a successful conclusion.

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