

Preserving Livelihoods and Forests: Community Based Sustainable Harvesting of Resources

Gujarat fellowships: Dr. Leena Gupta, Nandubhai Rathwa

'Development' and Tribal Cultures

Tribal cultures are at the receiving end of the onslaught of the modern "development" paradigm in India. An example of this conflict can be seen in the Chhota Udepur region in Gujarat that has a large indigenous population. Rathwas are a major tribal community living in the steep hills of the Aravalis. They have a rich holistic culture based on living in harmony with nature. Their life-philosophy makes no separation between religious beliefs and the way of living.

This community has faced the same malady that has affected most of the tribal areas - inroads of mainstream culture, flight to cities and socio-political manipulation by political parties and vested interests. Unlike many other tribal communities, the Rathwas have been agriculturists for a long time and many have land rights based on the Forest Rights Act. Unfortunately, the adoption of profit oriented (hence non-sustainable) agriculture has inevitably led to large-scale degradation of their agricultural assets particularly due to soil erosion. The result is diminishing returns that demoralize the younger generation who are unaware of their natural riches. This adds to the lure of jobs in the big cities.

To counter all these influences, there is a vigorous movement to resist the inroads of mainstream culture and to sustain the richness of Rathwa culture. This combines well with the work being spearheaded by Dr. Leena to harvest resources for the benefit of the local community as opposed to remote corporations and to do that in a sustainable way. This entails harmoniously combining the practices that have sustained these communities for centuries with the best that modern science offers. Raising awareness of traditional practices is critical, since many tribals themselves are oblivious to the richness of their own tribal heritage.

The Fellows

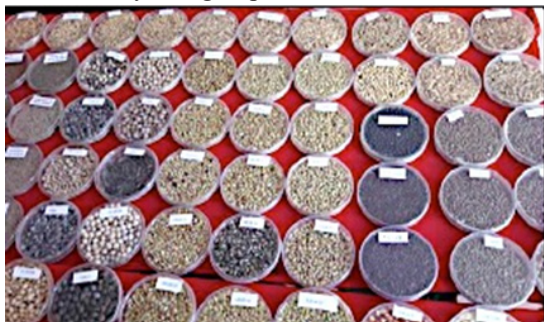
"Community based action research" is how Dr. Leena defines her work, which combines activism with scholarship. She got her PhD in Ecology and Ethno Biology from Bhavnagar University. Leena brings in a unique perspective with her zeal for social justice, the scientific approach and community oriented sustainable development. In the past, Leena has worked with many NGOs in the field of natural resource preservation and livelihood development. The base for all these activities is the AAJ (Adivasi Jan Utthan Trust) ashram in the village of Bhekadiya which started 35 years ago as a hostel for local tribal children and has now grown into a much-admired community organization. AAJ is entirely supported by voluntary efforts. The IFA fellowship allows Dr. Leena to be a lynchpin between multiple activities going on under the banner of AAJ in various states such as Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

Nature of Work

Her work is focused on developing a model for ecologically sustainable development. It puts her at the center of the clash between modernity and tradition. The cornerstone of this work is organizing people around the awareness of their rich natural resources and making them realize how their prosperity, both in the short-term as well as in the long-term, depends more on preserving their rich natural resources rather than abandoning them for work in the big cities. Working together for the good of the community comes natural to this movement. This approach is seen clearly in the push for collective ownership as opposed to individual ownership and management of land and forests. It is also known as Community Forest Rights as compared to Individual Forest Rights.

Salient Activities

- Educating, organizing and mobilizing tribal villages for obtaining Community Forest Rights under India's Forest Rights Act for preserving their livelihoods and for sustaining natural resources
- Raising incomes by food processing and marketing
- Bringing awareness of the richness of local resources and promoting diets and health treatments accordingly
- Preserving indigenous food varieties with seed banks
- Health care centers including care home for mentally disabled
- Children and youth groups



Varieties of indigenously grown grains being developed as a seed bank



Leena demonstrating use of indigenous medicinal riches

2022-23 Update

The Numbers:

	Activity	Nos.	Td
1	Check dams built	16	80
2	Kankrej cows distributed to needy farmers in Bhekadiya	100	
3	Kuccha road build by the local community in Jhamli	10 kms	
4	Seeds of local varieties collected for the Adivasi Culture Meet	30 kg	
5	Plants planted on the boundaries of check dams	10000	
6	Farmers undertaking organic farming in 17 villages	59	

7) In November 2022, as an input for COP 27 that took place in Egypt, a process was undertaken with children of Bhekadiya and Kanalva. The report of this process was sent to the UN Headquarters at Geneva, with copies to UNICEF offices at Delhi and Gandhinagar.

8) After the 4 States Adivasi Convention where 7-8 lakh adivasis attended, the Central government deputed a team to follow up on why the recognition of Forest Rights claims was making such slow progress. Tribals from 10 villages presented their issues namely that only dried wood, gum, water, and fish catch were allowed but the protection, development and management rights were not. The committee was also told that new claims had not been allowed. An order to give form (त्र) was given so new claims regarding community Forest rights could be filled out.

9) As a follow up of the Mahayatra, Government appointed Ram Singh Rathva an ex-MP of Chhota Udepur District as the Chairman of TRIFED as a result of him submitting the report of the Mahayatra in January 2020 to the India Govt. Following this, a group of 1,450 women from 58 villages was formed with the intention of training these women in the collection of forest produce and the making of nutritious food based on forest produce.

Two major events took place in 2022:



30 kg of seeds of local varieties were collected for saving and distribution



Local varieties of various plants were planted and displayed

1) **The Kudrati Darshan Mela (Nature Festival)** was attended by more than 800 tribal people and a total of Rs 80,870/- was spent by the people of the region for this mela. Two children from the 9th Standard, Ramiben and Paresh bhai of Kanalva coordinated the proceedings. The activities at the mela included discussion on nature philosophy and lessons to be learnt about the same from the Vedas. A report on the treatment of livestock attacked by lumpy virus during COVID was also shared.

The use of local from herbal remedies proved very effective in controlling the lumpy virus disease. None of the livestock treated by

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these local remedies died, though there were many cattle deaths in other villages. Awareness was spread of the value of local foods including millets like jowar, bajra, bhedi, bunti, kodu, ragi, malan, dangar, kathod which require less water and are relatively disease free.

A model of Fenai Hill Watershed development was made by the children for the mela to explain its importance in the culture and life of the residents. Local varieties of plants found in the region were planted in the model to explain their importance. Models of Adivasi life prepared in mud were also displayed. Cottage industry for production of brooms, rope, wood-work, tailoring, ambar charkha, Earthen vessels were also displayed.

Parikrama of the Fenai Hill forest for protection and prevention of forest fires. A total of Rs 32,060/- was spent on the parikrama program which was collected locally with some contribution from the AAJ supporters.



2. Tribal Convention

Dr. Leena and her team helped conduct a Tribal Convention for Adivasis at Hamirparaa, Bhakadiya from January 13th through January 15th, 2023. About 8 Lakh Adivaasi delegates from the four neighboring States of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat attended.

The issues discussed were:

1. **Adivasi Culture:** Need to develop societies where Livelihoods, Biodiversity and Nature are protected
2. **Realization of the potential** of the Natural Resources to protect and sustain dignified Livelihoods
3. **Empowerment of local governance** / Gramsabha empowerment, **Tribal medicine** and conservation of medicinal plants
4. **Awareness about the nutritional and health value** of local foods
5. **Development of University education** facilities for Adivasis **Protection from spread of forest fires** and forest Mafia from destruction of the forests.



IFA Fellow Nandubhai Rathwa at the Tribal Convention

Fenai Rewakhand Biodiversity Federation members (member villages) contributed at every level through cash, kind, time, planning & management (before, during & after), etc. A total of Rs Two lakhs was collected in cash from member villages and more than 60000 Kg of raw food materials were collected in kind for the convention."

-- IFA Liaison: Vivek Dabholkar