

Appiko

A hug in time

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guarantee 100 days of labour in a financial year to those registered under it, under various categories such as natural resource management, drought proofing, water harvesting and conservation, afforestation and tree planting, and horticulture activities. In reality however, what it has actually done is to convert farmers to road layers and construction labour owing to limited interpretation and short sighted applications of the Act. This is not only an unsustainable means of livelihood, it also strips them of the dignity they have as farmers and suppliers of food for the nation.

Manohar Dronagiri, a farmer in Doni village in Mundargi taluk of Gadag district says, “The NREGA has broad implications, which can be used for the benefit of farmers, small or big. It is up to the village panchayat to prepare need-based, work plans in consultation with the community for each year. These can be within the framework of the Act and still include activities that can really help farmers.”

An example he quotes is that the Act allows for natural resource management. Interpreted properly, this can help farmers to be employed for 100 days to rejuvenate the soils on their own farms by building farm ponds, collecting biomass for the farm and get paid for it. Dronagiri speaks from experience as he has used the Act for horticulture activities on one hectare of his farm. The NREGA also provides for material costs, besides wages and this has helped him to plant 300 sapota trees in his farm.

Mr S.M. Patil, President, Doni village panchayat observes, “It is not possible to keep building roads year after year. We need other activities which can provide the required 100 days of labour to our people. That is why we have contacted all the concerned departments, such as horticulture, forest etc and included their schemes into our yearly work plans. This not only gives opportunities for steady work, it also contributes to the progress and development of the entire village and community.”

Mr S.B. Revanna, Executive Officer of Mundargi taluk panchayat says, “The NREGA gives guidelines, which need to be interpreted according to local requirements.” He draws an evocative parallel, “The Act is as versatile as rice. You can either eat it bare or make *pulao* out of it. It is a question of interpretation, and the interpretation has to be for the overall development of the people. We have given special emphasis to horticulture activities as this area has erratic rainfall and it is difficult for people to cultivate seasonal crops. We also make special efforts to promote organic farming systems.”

It is obvious that the NREGA can be used to benefit farmers and what is more, bring them into the fold of organic farming. It just needs more proactive planning on the part of panchayats while preparing their annual work plans.

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It was 25 years ago this month when villagers in Karnataka undertook an eight km trek to resist massive tree felling at the Kalase forests. In today's milieu, the Appiko movement is facing fresh challenges.

If your journey along the west coast still remains picturesquely green, thank the chants that had rented the air of this region 25 years ago, and which seemingly echo even today. Chanting the Kannada slogan of *Ulisu, Belasu and Balasu*, meaning 'save, grow and sustain', the forest-loving people of Uttara Kannada - the most green district in the country - stood up against the tyranny of the state that was clearing the native forests to pave way for monoculture plantations.

The 25-year-long journey

History was created on 8 September 1983 when people from villages around Salkani in Uttara Kanada district undertook to resist massive tree felling operations underway at the Kalase forests. Hordes of men and women laid seige to the forest over the next three months, hugging the trees and forcing the perpetrators with little option but to make an unceremonious exit.

The news spread fast, catching the imagination of forest dwellers across the state in Kodagu, South Kanara, Chikamagalur and Shimoga districts. Appiko, meaning 'hug the trees', soon became a potent expression to counter violence against nature, reflecting empathy towards forests. “It seems a cosmic force was fuelling indelible energy into each of us,” recalls M N Mableshwar of Gubbigadde village in Sirsi.

The villagers of Gubbigadde and Balegadde, who were the first to lodge a formal protest against clear felling wonder if Appiko could have found a better home than Uttara Kannada. Called the 'forest' district, this region had an impressive 82 per cent of its geographical area under forests in 1950, earning the tropical evergreen forests in the Western Ghats the distinction of being one of the 16 global biodiversity hotspots in the world.

Despite hailing from the 'forest' district himself, the then Chief Minister of Karnataka Ramakrishna Hegde took six years to withdraw the timber concessions given to forest based industries and impose a moratorium on felling



of green trees in the natural forests. Passed in 1990, the order has been valid till date. But for this order, the region would have long been shorn of its pristine green cover to fill the ever increasing demands for industrial development – mining, paper industry, hydro- power and railways.

“Dubious justifications for forest clearance have made a mockery of the order,” laments Pandurang Hegde, who not only led the movement but continues to anchor it. Six hydropower projects including a nuclear power plant on the 184-km short stretch of river Kali have already accounted for the loss of 21,000 hectares of forests. The irony is that of the 1,800 MW power being produced in the district, local consumption only accounts for 18 MW.

New challenges

There are significant milestones that the movement recounts as it begins to prepare itself for the challenges that lie ahead. The global discourse on democracy which adopts the neo-liberal model of market economy, poses new challenges to social movements such as Appiko. As consumerism casts its influence on young minds, the next generation lacks the empathy to align with social causes.

Building a fresh engagement with the younger generation to sustain countervailing forces and contest the oppressive policies of globalisation is a formidable challenge,” admits Hegde. The key word of ‘ecology’ has been

replaced by ‘economy’ and ‘conservation’ makes room for ‘consumption’.

In the present context, environment versus development debate is considered anti-growth both by the state as well as sections of the public. Be it land, water or forests, each natural entity gets viewed through an economic standpoint. Obsession with growth has helped brew widespread apathy towards ecological conservation. Needless to say, times have changed and the challenges have been further compounded since Appiko movement was launched 25 years ago.

Success for Appiko

Appiko may have lost some ground to changing developmental priorities but the ethos of a movement guided by sheer grit and determination still persists. Three years ago, it organised a massive protest against the proposed 4,000 MW Barge Mounted Power Plant at Tadadi. Over 25,000 people protested the setting up of a plant that could have devastated 1,800 hectares of estuary, created at the point where river Aghanashini empties itself into the Arabian Sea. The livelihoods of local fishermen came in handy in making a case against the proposed project.

The scrapping of the proposed seventh dam on river Kali and the holding back of the proposed rail link cutting across 2,000 hectares of tropical forests between Hubli and Ankola on account of environmental clearance are more

examples of the success and continued relevance of Appiko.

Appiko has neither been opposed to growth nor development; it views nature conservation as complementary to human growth and survival. While forests are destroyed for monetary returns, it must be remembered that there is no way of replacing the fundamental role of tropical forests in pulling the strong oceanic currents to offload their showers. As the threat of climate change becomes real, there cannot be anything more urgent and important than protecting the monsoon gateway of the country, i.e. the Sahyadri range.

With a view to convert present challenges into future opportunity and to showcase the significance of the Western Ghats from a wider perspective, it has been decided that the historic day of 8 September will henceforth be observed each year as the Sahyadri Day, so that the chants of *Ulisu*, *Belasu* and *Balasu* continue to echo in the region.

From modulating climate change to maintaining river discharge and from maintaining biodiversity to enriching nutrient regime, preservation of tropical forests can open a new window of opportunity at the global scale to generate unique ecological capital. It is in this context that Appiko is repositioning itself for a major role in the coming years.

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