

Empowerment of Soliga tribes

Tribal communities are a rich source of traditional knowledge. Initiatives that respect their knowledge while taking them through the process of development could be enriching to all the partners involved. Here is a case of a partnership which has been mutually enriching.

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Soligas living in harmony with nature.

Soligas are the major indigenous tribes of BR Hills situated in Chamarajanagar district of Karnataka state in south India. Since time immemorial, Soligas have led a semi-nomadic life and were engaged in shifting cultivation. Collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) like honey, lichens, soap nut, roots of Magali (*Decalapis hamiltonii*), fruits of Amla (*Embllica officinalis*), Chilla (*Strychnous patatorum*) and Alale (*Terminalia chebula*), is another important, but relatively recent occupation.

Nearly 50% of the Soligas (meaning those who originated from Bamboo) income is from sustainable harvesting of minor forest produce. They live in podus or settlements of 10 to 50 thatched huts. Each of their headmen is highly knowledgeable with respect to nature and traditional, sustainable agriculture.

Soligas practice subsistence agriculture for their sustenance. The indigenous cropping systems, animal rearing and other agriculture activities are in tune with the rituals of the tribes. Soligas are also known for their rich knowledge on soil fertility and ecofriendly agricultural practices. Since time immemorial, Soligas were practicing shifting cultivation. The Soligas seldom plough the land and they do not use chemical fertilizers or other chemical pest and diseases control measures. They have been practicing what the modern man refers to as organic and natural farming practices.

Soligas have been leading their life in harmony with nature and possess a rich wealth of indigenous knowledge on forest conservation and sustainable agriculture.

The Soligas isolated life with the nature stopped when B.R.Hills forests was declared a 'protected' area, in 1974. This led to the eviction of the Soligas from their interior podus. Shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of minor forest produce were not allowed. There was a shift from forest based production system to farm grown production system.

Exploitation by landlords and indebtedness often resulted in bonded labour. The Soligas remained ignorant of the government schemes and could not gain much from them.

Health as an entry point

Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK), a non sectarian and a humanitarian organization was founded by Dr.H Sudarshan in 1981. It started working with Soligas with the motto of sustainable development of tribal people through rights-based approaches to health, education, livelihood security and biodiversity conservation.

The interventions started with the most basic need of the communities, i.e., health. At that time, the Soligas were very shy and were hiding themselves in the forest. The initial help rendered by Dr.Sudarshan in curing poisonous snake bites and in de-worming gained the confidence and love of the Soliga community which fostered an unbreakable bond between the great humanitarian doctor and the innocent, and nature loving Soligas. Dr. Sudarshan understood the basic need of the people in terms of their medical requirements and promoted curative, promotive, rehabilitative and sustainable health care practices.

Organising communities

To bring in overall development of the communities, it was felt that they need to be helped beyond their health aspects. A leadership training workshop was conducted in 1985 which resulted in setting up of development councils called Soliga Abhivrudhhi Sanghas (SAS), to protect them from rapacious outsiders and resolving disputes within the community. Their work is coordinated by the Soliga Abhivrudhhi Maha Sangha, which helps the tribals in getting back their land and ensure that the forest department employs only Soligas in work to the plantations.

The individual podu sanghas are grouped into taluka sanghas. All Soliga men and women are members of the sanghas. Efforts are being made to include at least one woman in the committee. Local problems are discussed and solutions worked out. Very often contact meetings are organized along with officials to iron out contentious issues. The Sangha, through its programmes, have sorted out issues of alienation of tribal land by conducting systematic study and collection of accurate facts and figures. This helped in educating the people on the latest developmental programmes. It has been successful in getting pensions, training and development programmes, housing and agricultural projects and bank loans for the people. After initiating the Community Development Programmes at village, taluk, and at the district level, the exploitation of the innocent locals by contractors and the forest department stopped.

The sangha has co-ordinated with the Forest Department for the sanction of tree patta (right to harvest the produce of certain trees), irrigation, housing and drinking water schemes. By far, the most important contribution of the sanghas has been the sustainable management of minor forest produce by the people themselves. Further, the Soligas systems such as their traditional Nyaya (Justice)

have been rejuvenated by the unity that the SAS has created. In strengthening the community organization, street plays, Jathas or community meetings, and festivals have been effectively employed. *The Soligas have evolved the strategy of the three Ps – Petitioning the authorities; airing their grievances through the local Press and finally, Picketing and mass demonstrations. The local community is fighting effectively against the illegal granite quarrying and other environmental issues.*

Settled agriculture

Soligas were helped to adopt settled agriculture which they were not following traditionally. Every effort was made to preserve their traditional knowledge.

Mixed cropping system and multi-storied cropping systems are followed. They maintain intraspecific (genetic) diversity among the crop plants. In one case, they have grown eight varieties of finger millet. The field crops grown are finger millet, maize, field beans, pigeon pea, horsegram, beans, mustard, amaranthus, foxtail millet and pearl millet. Vegetable crops include, cucumber, pumpkin, tubers, perennial beans, etc. Most of the farmers grow finger millet and maize as staple food. Pulses like pigeon pea and field bean, oil seeds like mustard and castor, besides grain amaranthus are grown as mixed crops in the field of maize and finger millet. Several local varieties of these crops are grown without applying chemical fertilizers. Some cultural operations like mulching of crop residues, thinning, weeding etc., are carried out by them. In different crop species such as ragi, maize banana etc., they cultivate more than 6-12 varieties on each piece of land.

Agricultural operations are associated with certain rituals of tribals eg., *Ragi Habba* (Festival) which is associated with harvesting of millets. Soligas have their own method of forecasting rain, controlling diseases and pests, through their indigenous tribal traditional agricultural calendar. This traditional calendar represents the agricultural activities and rituals associated with the Soligas in a calendar year. It also gives an insight into the comprehensive traditional agronomic practices and rituals by the Soligas.

In order to preserve this wisdom, VGKK initiated a novel programme known as organic village. This programme is being implemented by the assistance of State Department of Agriculture, Karnataka. Presently, it is undertaken in 3 tribal villages of BR Hills in an area of 100ha. The main objective of this venture is preserving indigenous seed diversity, encouraging the use of eco-friendly manures, conserving seed diversity through seed banks and promoting soil conservation practices like live edge fencing. Under this programme, tribes are empowered through various activities like compost making, vermi-composting, constructing and maintaining farm ponds, seed fairs and seed campaigns. In addition to this, all benefits from the line department are made available.

As part of this programme, women self help groups (SHGs) were involved in seed storage. Many women have won prizes for the excellent collection of local seeds. VGKK is starting a organic selling center in the campus. Farmers are encouraged to supply organically grown vegetables, fruits, reared chickens, honey, wild edible products and food grains.

Totally 71 varieties of different crop seeds have been collected from 97 farmers' fields in different villages of the project area. Training on importance of local seeds in agro diversity, and organic farming is being given to farmers as well as to gram panchayath members. Several seed fairs (Beeja mela) and seed campaigns (Beeja yathre) have been conducted. Awareness programme on seed

multiplication, seed mapping, seed storage technology and documentation and inventory of different practices are the other components of the project.

Biodiversity conservation and sustainable harvesting of minor forest products

The local people have been living here for centuries and more than 50% of their income is derived from the collection of Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). In order to conserve the rich bio-wealth of this area, the tribal people were given training in Participatory Resource Monitoring (PRM). They have learnt methods for mapping the resources, estimating productivity, quantifying the extraction and evaluating the extent of regeneration. The Soligas are very selective and systematic about their indigenous way of collecting products like lichen, amla honey, fruits and fibers. Neither it is random nor exploitative. Fruits and berries are harvested only from trees which flower profusely and when very ripe. Raw fruits are not collected. This method leaves enough fruits behind for birds, small animals and insects which depend on them. They harvest 29% of fruits of one variety each year and 60% of fruits of another variety of goose berry. The percentage of overall collection of fruits does not seem to have a negative impact on the natural regeneration of fruit trees, a measure of sustainability in extraction.

Conclusion

In more than two decades of its association with soliga tribes, VGKK opines that it is not just the Soligas who have been empowered in the process. VGKK had also imbibed many of the strengths of Soligas in building their organization. It was a partnership based on mutual learning.

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