

Report on Bheemashankar (AID) project Activities

Project Period: - September 2008 to December 2009

Background: -

Before starting of this project a 6-month exploratory phase was carried out by Kalpavriksh between June 2007-November 2007 to deepen our understanding of the sanctuary through visits to the sanctuary, extensive review of the huge amount of secondary literature available on the sanctuary, and interactions and discussions with individuals and organizations working in the area in various fields. The objective of the exploratory phase was to assess the role that Kalpavriksh could play in moving towards a more participatory conservation practices in Bheemashankar.

The exploratory phase revealed the need for possible interventions in the following areas:

1. Environment Education on the local Ecological, historical & cultural Values for local school Children.
2. Coordinated action by all actors – individuals, groups, Researchers & organizations - in Bhimashankar area to address & solve the issues.
3. Tracking the Social and Ecological impacts of Tribal Forest Rights Act in Bheemashankar as this Act has a great relevance for Bheemashankar sanctuary, particularly the provision on community forestry resource to move towards community based conservation processes.
4. Community based eco-tourism management for better livelihood & ecological security.

Based on this experience & financial support from AID, we initiated the activities in Bhorgiri & Yelavali villages. The implementation of the project (First phase) began in September 2008. Yelavali & Bhorgiri are the two villages of which Kalpavriksh decided to focus on. These villages have less external intervention from other NGOs & government agencies. The intention was to start with two of the activities identified during the exploratory phase, namely, facilitating a tourism plan and implementation of the forest rights act in these two villages. The work started with discussions with the villages in both the villages. Soon it was evident that the local village institutions are either non-existent or extremely weak. These are further fragmented by party politics, leading towards villagers disinterest in any process towards conservation and development.

Activities taken up in Bhorgiri and Yelavali villages: -

In Bhorgiri village, constant efforts at trying to bring people together to be able to discuss the above two activities were extremely discouraging. We had constant & several meetings with villagers to discuss about to start the programme. But people were either not gathering for meeting or not giving any consent. Kalpavriksh team, however, did not want to start any activity in the village (which had an impact on the lives of all villagers and surrounding ecosystem) without consent from the entire village. There was one group of young people (Balyogi Ganeshnath Maharaj Seva Mandal) very interested in following with both the programmes.

Yelavali is a remote village of 15 households, having mix population of Mahadeo Koli (tribal) & Baudh (Scheduled Caste) people, inside the Bheemashankar Wild Life Sanctuary, where one has to reach by walking through the jungle & by crossing holy Bheema river (In rainy days it is hard to cross this river due to heavy water flow). The experience in Yelavali was very different. The villagers were very interested in coming together for their own development. In Yelavali, there are fewer interventions from government machineries as well as from individuals, groups & NGOs.

Based on the above experience following activities have been taken up in the villages between project period –

A) Community Based Eco-tourism Management: -

At first this project was started to implement the possibility of community based eco-tourism management for livelihood as well as ecological security. We had several meetings with villagers regarding to get their consent on to start the programme but in vain. In this regards we also have discussions & dialogues with individuals, forest officials & organizations, which are working in the Bheemashankar area. On the basis of that we realised that Eco-tourism would bring more distraction between the community, which is absolutely opposite side of our work. Meanwhile we recognised that the youth group called “Balyogi Ganeshnath Maharaj Seva Mandal” is interested in the activities related to the Forest & village development. Therefore we decided to support & strengthen the group to facilitate the village level activities.

B) Supporting the local youth group in Bhorgiri & Yelavali: -

The active youth group in Bhorgiri is also disappointed at not being able to bring the village together for any village development activity and wants to register a youth body under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. They are engaged in some social activities like helping in village cultural programmes, weddings, village cleaning etc. And they intend to start social and ecological development activities with the village. Kalpavriksh team has decided to support their effort and facilitate

through them the process of bringing the village together for the social & ecological development.

We have several meetings, discussions & individual dialogues with them to get it registered. We also visited Charity Commissioner office for several times to collect information vis-à-vis registration. Registration documents are also ready & will be filed in next month of September to Registrar office at Pune.

Yelavali youth group is also active & intend to have development of Yelavali village. We are dialoguing with them to get completed the long awaited electricity work. We also dialogued with Maharashtra Arogya Mandal to deepen the well in Yelavali to solve the Water scarcity problem. This work will be done in early summer.

With both the youth group we discussed about some schemes like National Rural Employment Guarantee (now it is an Act) to take up the employment generation through Bio-diversity management ecological restoration related work. As per the demand of Bhorgiri youth group, a kalpavriksh staff & two of the youth group members met Tahsildar of Rajgurunagar (Taluka place) to organize a Caste certificate Mela at Bhorgiri as an entry point activity to speed up the work in Bhorgiri. He told us that the Mela could be taken after the state assembly elections after the consultation with Gram Panchayat Members.

C) Facilitation of the implementation of Forest Rights Act in both the villages: Forest Rights Act is the revolutionary achievement by tribal, tribal Activists & some organizations of India. The Act has been enacted in December 2006 by Indian Parliament to recognize & vest the Forest Rights of Tribal & other traditional forest dwellers. All tribal & tribal activists had feeling of great historical victory by the enactment of this act. But the fair implementation of the Act is seemed a big question mark throughout the India. At the beginning of its journey, the Act has been glorified as the Act of getting Right of Forest Land or Act to get Forest land. On the basis of that Most of the conservationists, forest officials & wild lifers opposed & even filed several PIL to cancel this Act. But slowly & gradually, with the efforts of different workshops, trainings, meetings & discussions, the scene is changing a bit. Most of the people are now talking about the all traditional Forest Rights including customary Rights of Community to protect, conserve & manage their Community Forest Resource (CFR).

1) Bhorgiri:-

May be due to being in the Wild Life Sanctuary, the official process of implementation of Forest Rights Act has not started yet in this area. The process of forming Forest Rights Committees (FRC) has been started in

the outside villages of Bhimashankar Wild Life Sanctuary. The Kalpavriksh team held several meetings & discussions with the villagers & youth group members on the issue. The villagers have also been made aware about the Act & the process of filing the claims for establishing their legal Rights on Forest resource. But due to being in Wild life sanctuary people from Bhorgiri are afraid to claim the Rights. Because they feel that this information would be used by Forest department to prove the damage to the forest from local people to evict them from the Forest. In this regards we have meetings & person to person discussions with local people to simplify them the real spirit of the Act. Now some people are convinced enough but some need more efforts.

Vis-à-vis Forest Rights Act, we have some meetings with youth group of Bhorgiri to initiate the implementation of the FRA by organizing Gram Sabha for awareness & formation of Forest Rights Committee. According to them to have legal base to the Gram Sabha, they discussed this issue to Gram Sevak & Sarapanch. But getting the dates of Gramsevak for the Gram Sabha is difficult as he was busy in his work of 5 Gram Panchayats. This Gram Sabha will ne organized in next month of Septemeber to discuss & form the Forest Rights Committee.

2) Yelavali: -

Yelavali is the remote village of 15 households At first we had several meetings with Yelavali villagers to aware them about the Forest Rights Act & the process of establishing Rights on the surrounding forest resource. Here we got very positive response from the youth group & other people. They all are very good & come together for the overall village development. With the help of youths we arranged a Gram Sabha to form a Forest Rights Committee. We also identified two local educated youths to fill individual claim forms to claim forest Rights those they are using traditionally.

We organized a training programme for Forest Rights Committee to understand the Act & the process of claiming Forest Rights. ECONET, one of the organizations working in Bheemashankar, prepared detailed claim forms to sharpen the claim process. For Yelavali we managed to get detailed claim forms of FRA, which have been filled up & ready to submit to the Forest Rights Committee of Yelavali.

D) Documentation & Reformation of traditional Cultural practices: -

Tribal has their own rich & valuable cultural practices, which are now getting diminish because of external pressure of other cultures. Therefore to protect & reform their cultural heritage we planned to celebrate a festival called "HOLI" in their traditional manner. Whole day wend very well but at the time of celebration some quarrel happened between two families, which created tense atmosphere. Therefore the cultural

celebration part of it was not happened. But after some time women performed their traditional group songs by making moving circle. That was only satisfactory part of it. In future we are planning to facilitate the process of documentation of the cultural practices by local educated youths. And these documentations can be published with the name of documenters.

E) Legal Awareness & education: -

Between the meetings with both the villagers & youth groups, we discussed & disseminated the legal information regarding the Forest Rights Act, 2006, the Wild Life Protection Act, 1972 & the Bio-diversity Act, 2002. Through the meetings & discussions with the villagers we realized that local people have very little or no knowledge about the legal issues that are impacting on the tribal Forest relationship scenario. Therefore we started legal awareness & education programme in these villages

F) Facilitation of the process for better implementation of the Govt. schemes, particularly National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Trying to link this with biodiversity conservation, water conservation and rain water harvesting practices, and other natural resource management related activities. This will help create a direct link between the local employment and natural resource conservation. For this we discussed it with the both youth groups & collected some information from the government offices to implement it in a better manner at village level. To study the employment status, we had a family to family employment survey. Analysis of these forms will be done in next month.

G) Linkages with the Government & other agencies: -

Throughout the project period we contacted various government agencies for the discussions & to get information.

- ❖ Forest department: - We met Range Forest Officer of Bhimashankar related to explore the implementation of the plastic ban in the Bhimashankar Wild Life Sanctuary. But due to Bhimashankar Temple & continuous flow of the pilgrims it seems difficult to Forest department to manage. And Temple trust also is not interested to pay attention to the issues like sanitation facilities & ecological degradation.
- ❖ Tribal Research & Training Institute: - We have regular contacts with the TRTI related to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act & other Schemes for Tribal.
- ❖ Collector office: - We met Tahsildar, NREGS department, at Collector office to get information on National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA).

- ❖ Tahsildar Office, Khed: - We have two visits in Tahsildar, Khed Office. First visit was to get information on the status of NREGS implementation in Khed Tahasil of Pune District. And second visit was to organize Caste Certificate Mela at Bhorgiri to disburse the caste certificate to avoid corruption & fasten the process.
- ❖ Pune Zilla Parishad & Rajgurunagar Panchayat Samittee Education Departments: - We visited Pune ZP & Rajgurunagar Panchayat Samittee Education departments for several times to raise the Bhorgiri school issues. The school was in shortage of teachers. Due to the constant follow up by Kalpvriksh & some members of youth group two teachers are appointed.
- ❖ We filed several Right To Information (RTI) applications to get information from Forest Department, NREGA department, Revenue & Planning department at Collector office.

H) Bio-Diversity Festival: -

Tribal are mostly dependant on the forest for their food, fodder, fuel & culture. As one of the major NTFPs, wild vegetables are the most crucial part of their diet. These wild foods satisfy their needs of protein, Vitamin, carbohydrates, calcium & so on. Monsoon is the season of Variety of wild vegetables, which provides various nutrients to nurture. Local people have extreme amount of traditional knowledge about it. But recently people reduced the use of it in their diet, which might cause threat to their health & traditional knowledge as well. The young generation also has little or no knowledge about these things, which can be caused threat to the bio-diversity. Therefore to celebrate the use of wild food & to promote more use of wild food in their diet - which will lead to the conservation & management of the bio-diversity - we organized a Bio-diversity Mela (Festival) on 1st of September with the help of Yelavali villagers.

Out of 14 families of Yelavali 12 participated in the festival. Rests were gone out for agriculture related work. All people were present for the festival. All Men in the village took responsibility to & overall arrangement of the festival including cooking food for the guests & people in the village.