

## Summary of Van Gujjar and Soliga community exchange program

3-5 December 2023

1. A three-day exchange visit program was conducted in Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserve in Karnataka from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023. The exchange program between the Van Gujjar pastoralists from Uttarakhand, and Soliga tribals inhabiting the BRT tiger reserve landscape, was facilitated in collaboration with Kalpavriksh, and Shruthi Jagadeesh, a Phd student from University Colorado, Boulder. The objective of the exchange visit was to create and allow a space for dialogue between the two communities, and to learn and share about the challenges faced by both forest-dwelling communities, how they have navigated through these challenges, and their core areas of intervention on the community level, and methods of engagement, including documentation, networking and advocacy.



Figure 1: Meeting between the VGTYS and Soliga Sangha

The three-day discussions revolved around themes of Protected Area Governance and rights of forest dwelling communities, primarily within tiger reserves in India, conservation induced displacement, including rehabilitations and evictions, and the current status of both communities who have faced relocation, implementation of the forest rights act, and institutional and other barriers faced by both communities in its implementation. The two groups also shared on their strategies and successes of community mobilization and active

participation in dealing with challenges faced by both communities. A brief account of the three-day program is provided below:

- a. Day 1: Introduction of all participations (Van Gujjar youth, Kalpavriksh team, Shruthi Jagadeesh, Ashoka Trust for Research on Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) field team) and an interaction with the ATREE team, headed by Dr. Madegowda, that included discussions on understanding of the BRT landscape, the Soliga community, association of various organizations in the landscape, resettlement and displacements that have taken place, and the impact of declaring the area as a tiger reserve on the community.



Figure 2: Van Gujjar and Kalpavriksh team in the rehabilitation site in BRT

The team also visited Muthagaddagade podu (a podu is a Soliga settlement) and interacted with members of the community as well as the district level Sangha leaders on the livelihood opportunities in the community and the status of ownership and access of land of the community inside the tiger reserve.

- b. Day 2: Field visit to the honey processing plant that is currently being run by the Soliga community to understanding the process of honey harvesting, procurement, packaging, marketing and sale of the honey.



Figure 3: VGTYS and KV team at ADAVI Food Processing Unit of the Soliga tribals at BRT

The interaction also included discussions on the transition of the soliga community from agriculture to honey and coffee harvesting, and on the cultural practices of the Soliga community.

The team then visited two podus within the tiger reserve where CFR titles have been distributed, and to understand the process of formulating a CFR management plan.

The day ended with an interaction between the Soliga Sangha leaders and the team, on the formation of the Sangha, their organizational structure and functioning and the process of community strengthening through the Sanga. The Van Gujjar youth also shared their experiences on formation, organizational structure and activities carried

out by the Sangathan, with emphasis on FRA towards the assertion of their rights over their land.

- c. Day 3: the team interacted with youth members of 'Punarchit', an organization working the Soliga youth towards documenting their culture and traditions, and the use of social media.



Figure 4: Group sharing between the VGTYS and Punarchit youth on Social Media, Indigenous cultures and traditions, and Mental Health

The interaction included discussions on the challenges of women and youth in the community, the need for education with emphasis on their cultures and traditions, and on issues of mental health. Both teams shared their experiences on the use of social media towards documenting their cultural and traditional practices, focusing on food, language, and festivals. They highlighted the success and challenges they have faced in the process, while also learning from their counterparts on overcoming challenges in social media communications.



Figure 5: Rehabilitation site in the BRT Tiger Reserve

Following the exchange visit, the youth team participated in a 3 day national Level workshop on Community Conserved Areas, held in Bangalore. The team presented their work on FRA, and participated in a panel discussion titled “Understanding concerns of inclusion - gender, youth, caste, class and others within territories of life”.

**Report prepared by Akshay Chettri, Kalpavriksh**