

In Nilgiris, forest rights unlikely to bring back wild foods into tribal diet

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Nilgiris, Mar 6 (IANS/ 101Reporters): Accessing individual and community forest resource rights is a significant milestone for traditional forest dwellers. Last November, 13 villages in Pillur region of the Nilgiris were granted community forest rights under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. But will it bring back the disappearing traditional food into the Adivasi platter?

Only a slim chance exists as forests have made way for monoculture over the decades, with the communities dwelling there pushed out. Their lifestyles have changed, and so have their food habits.

Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas and Kattunayakars are the main primitive tribal groups found in the region. According to Census data, the district has a total tribal population of 32,813.

"We received 1,740 claims for individual rights, of which 1,623 have been approved and issued. All the 80 community rights claims have also been granted," Nilgiris District Forest Officer Goutham Subramanian told 101Reporters.

While individual rights deal with agricultural rights over forestland, community rights relate to the collection of non-timber forest produce, and customary rights such as habitation, worship and cremation.

One crop, many changes

The Nilgiris has witnessed a slow yet steady change over a period of 200 years, with exotic monoculture plantations of tea, silver oaks and eucalyptus taking over the landscape.

"Only 10 per cent of the original Shola grasslands is left. By 1988, 11,000 hectares came under cultivation. Large-scale plantations caused more invasive species to expand into previously unexplored regions, and now these species make up 70 per cent of what were formerly native grasslands in the plateau," says Godwin Vasant Bosco, an Ooty-based native plant conservationist.

Janaki, a community health nurse for over 30 years, still remembers how several families were thrown out of their forest homes when she was just five. "One fine day, the Tamil repatriates from Sri Lanka took over our lands, cleared the forests and started tea and pepper plantations."

"Even our present settlement was once a thick forest. It gradually became a town. In fact, no dense forest exists anywhere in the neighbourhood now," says the Betta Kurumba tribal.

Mullu Kurumba tribal KT Subramaniam says migration happened a generation before he was born. "Tribal communities had no idea of land ownership and title claims, and many among us failed to prove ownership."

"Kattunayakars and Kurumbas did not get land titles as they mainly hunt and forage for forest produce, and were not farmers traditionally. The same was true with Paniyas. With no land access, all of them had to shift out of forests," explains Subramaniam, also the secretary of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam.

Food for thought

Be it for medicine, health or ceremonies, tribal people had relied only on a wide variety of wild foods, native fungi, plants, millets and wild honey for countless generations. "With forests gone, wild foods have also disappeared. This change directly points to the loss of biodiversity," says Janakiamma, an Irula tribal leader.

Mallika, another Irula leader, claims the increased prevalence of diabetes and high blood pressure among the rural and tribal communities by the age of 40 shows how much their eating habits have changed. "Consumption of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and meat helped support the overall health of our older generations. Discussions and some policy plans are needed on the inclusion of nutritious foods in the dietary schedule since malnutrition is also seen among tribals," she says.

According to P Chandran of Kurumba community, less dependence on the forest has led to less intake of nutritious food. "Millets are not part of our diet. At times, we collect forest produce, but that too is negligible in quantity nowadays."

A health animator from the Paniya community, Bindu agrees that the production of jackfruit, mango, tamarind, mushrooms and tubers in the wild has declined considerably in the Nilgiris. "We see changes in the flowering and growth patterns of trees around us."

Bindu says they do not even enter the forest these days as the tiger population is on the rise. "I have heard from my father about samai and ragi cultivation in the forest. We never stayed continuously in one place as we were slaves of the Chettys of Wayanad."

Janaki reminisces how her grandparents used to cultivate ragi, samai, cholam, rice, wheat, sesame and mustard in the forest farmlands. Instead of selling, the produce was shared in the community. She also agrees that farming inside forests is too risky due to animal interactions.

PDS widens the gap

"For the past 35 years, I do not remember eating anything other than rice. Millets were never part of my food system," admits Kumar, a Kurumba who left his tribal settlement on the forest fringes to work on a farm in Kookalthorai.

"We get nearly 26 kg of rice, two kg of wheat, and one kg each of sugar, dal and pulses for a two-member family under the Public Distribution System (PDS). In addition, the tribal communities grow cash crops such as pepper, banana, arecanut, tea and coffee these days," Bindu explains.

Janaki also mentions how there has been no going back to millets and farmlands after the introduction of PDS. "Rice has become our wholesome diet. Tribals work in plantations and as daily wage labourers in estates. The food they eat depends on the wages they get."

The recipe for malnourishment is quite evident in her words. "We usually consume rice thrice a day with tomato chutney and kantari chillies. Vegetables and greens are mostly missing from our diet. With the intensity of monsoon rains increasing in the last few years, sourcing crab and fish has become difficult. Thala pazham, athi pazham, koppa pazham, wild bananas, mushrooms and tubers are not common in the forest these days due to climate change."

At the same time, cultivation on forest fringes has increased human-animal conflict. Elephants devour their favourite millets, whereas a reduced herbivorous population in the wild makes predators turn to

livestock.

Subramaniam lists what has been lost over the years. "Choori, nellikka, kalli, njavaal pazham, kotta pazham, bamboo shoots have all disappeared. Even sourcing bamboo rice is difficult. Ragi, samai, vegetables, tubers like air potatoes, varieties of yam, colocasia, muthira, sesame, mustard and bananas used to be cultivated in the forest, but not anymore."

A ban on hunting of deer, porcupines and boar under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, also cut meat out of the system. "We used to have 25 cattle at home, so milk, buttermilk and curd were readily available. Forget cattle, now even good things found around us are not appreciated by the young and old alike. Ragi and samai find no takers due to their nutty taste. Many turn their eyes away from jackfruit too."

Medicinal greens for treating fever, menstrual issues, skin diseases and wounds have also vanished. "It is less of forests and more of people. When people were fewer, produce was available in large quantities. At present, only challenges are innumerable," says Janaki.

Back to roots

The challenges in getting life on track are quite evident in the way Kattunayakar population in the district has come down. Subramaniam says in his over 30 years of social service, he has come across several cases of vanishing Kattunayakar forest settlements. Income was affected when forests near Mudumalai National Park became protected and the small plantations and estates within the sanctuary where tribals found work were either sold off or relocated.

Keystone Foundation, which has been reviving traditional crops in the last three decades and helping tribal labourers return to their roots to revive their fallow lands, promotes the cultivation of ragi, thinai and samai, besides multi-cropping.

"We promoted group farming of nutritious greens and medicinal plants. We gave them seeds, bought back their produce and even helped them set up a farmer-producer collective. We also ensured the setting up of seed banks for native produce. Continuous downpour and rampaging elephants pose challenges, but tribals have revived farming and are also collecting non-timber produce like honey," Keystone Foundation's founder-director and The Nilgiris Foundation (TNF) co-founder Pratim Roy told 101Reporters.

Organised recently by the TNF, the first edition of the Nilgiris Wild Food Festival is part of a larger plan to engage the community in promoting sustainable diets. But despite gaining forest rights, many tribals see forest farming only as a supplementary job in view of climate change.

Asked if it is possible to return to their old habitats and traditional dietary practices, Subramaniam remarks, "It is impossible. The rich and abundant forests are gone. We need to educate our children. That is the only way forward."