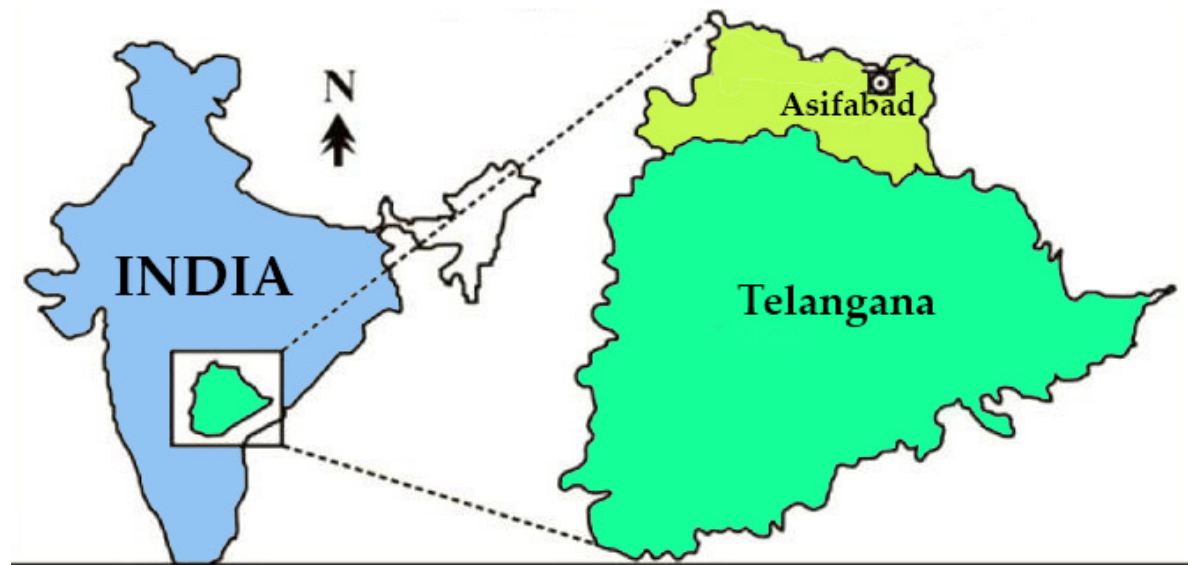


Adivasi people and sustainable land use options in Asifabad: a photostory



NTFP-EP

INDIA

NTFP Exchange Programme Networking Forum, India



The forest department in Asifabad had invited the NTFP Exchange Programme Networking Forum (NTFP Forum) to visit some villages in the district and, after assessing the forests and discussions with the local communities, suggest ways forward for better conservation of the forests and livelihood opportunities for the people.

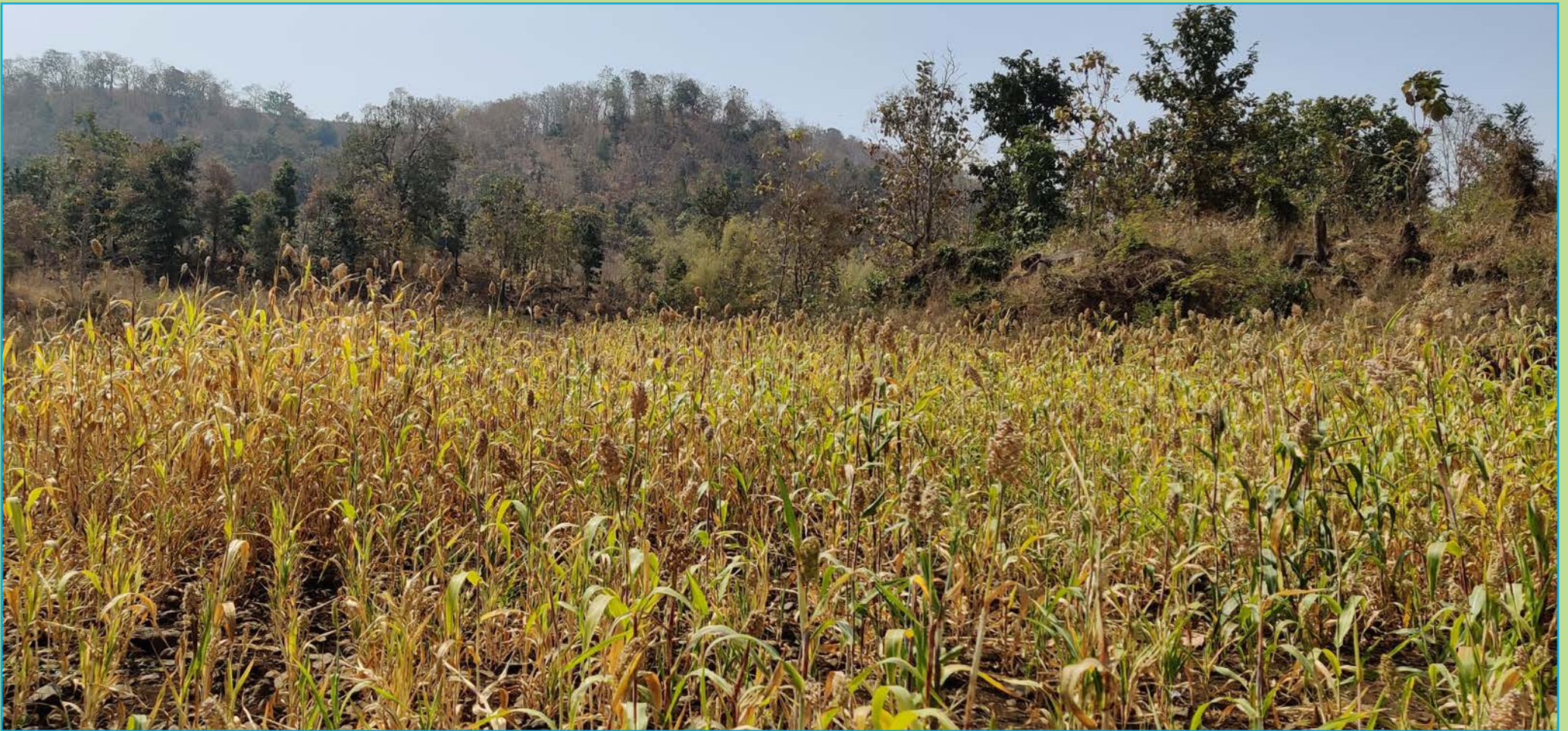
Much of the district of the erst-while Adilabad region is of undulating terrain clothed with tropical dry deciduous forests. Teak predominates in most places, constituting 30-50 % of the vegetation of the forests. During the time of our visit leaf-fall had begun and the forest floor was becoming littered with dry leaves.



A recurring problem is the fragmentation of the forests, some of the patches being in the tiger reserve, and the destruction of grasslands. The vast tracts of monocrop (cotton) farming has directly trapped the farming communities economically, and indirectly in other ways (health, vulnerability, debt). Many farmers confessed to getting lower returns for their efforts as the soil was becoming less fertile than in previous years and required higher inputs; however, other factors, such as the lack of water or their debts to the seed and fertilizer suppliers, made it difficult to switch to other farming methods. Some farmers cultivate a little jowar, tuwar, maize and chana for their own consumption; these were some of their traditional crops.



Almost all the villages in the district (that we visited) had large areas under cotton. These areas were earlier forested and encroached upon between 15-20 years ago, much of it post 2008, apparently at the instigation of local political leaders. As many of the villages are in remote areas monitoring them becomes very difficult for the forest department; other departments seldom visit these areas.



During our discussions with communities in more than 5 villages it was clear that no wild foods were harvested from the forests except jamun, amla and chironji, and the overall knowledge about foods had dwindled. The only ntfp traded in by the communities is bamboo, processed into mats (which are used as screens). The trade in both cotton and the bamboo mats are fully controlled by a few traders - the local communities getting a pittance for their efforts - and interventions for correcting this situation are acutely required. Access and knowledge about the market, fair MSPs, and village collectives to buy and trade in forest and agricultural produce are other areas to explore to ensure better livelihood options for the people.

In most of the villages the team visited the scarcity of water was mentioned; it also limited activities such as kitchen gardens. Water from some wells were carried home for washing to prevent polluting the source. Certain wells were demarcated for cattle and washing. The completion of Mission Bhagiratha was awaited eagerly as it promised to bring water to all villages.



At the outset it is necessary to focus on the most important and urgent matters that concern the tribal communities and the ecology of the district. A major issue is the vast areas of monoculture cotton: one needs to know the exact area, the areas deemed as encroachment, and possibly the cultivation that is benami, as the latter issue came up repeatedly during our conversations with the people as well as the forest department.





A picture of farmers in a jowar patch, a rare sight in the predominantly cotton-scape



A picture showing landscape and vegetation of the region: undulation hills and valleys, dry deciduous forests.



An Ocimum species, a weed locally known as mahavira, has taken over vast areas of open spaces in the tiger reserve as well as the surrounding forests. This makes the area very prone to fire in the dry season.

The NTFP Forum has planned two broad interventions. Broaden the scope of agriculture to include more food crops in an agro-forestry model; and include NTFPs as a livelihood option. At present the only NTFPs harvested and value added (into mats) is bamboo, and mahua flowers which are sold by the people in some villages.



The second intervention mentioned above has begun (though interrupted due to the pandemic). The NTFP team visited Jogpur village in Aisfabad on 17th March and held a meeting with 15 interested community members. Jogpur is a Kolam village with a population of about 60 people; it is rather remote and is not reachable during the monsoon.

Latitude: 19.473238
Longitude: 79.407208
Elevation: 269.12±16 m
Accuracy: 15.2 m
Time: 13-03-2021 10:15



Two staff from the Forum spent time in Addaghat village (Routa Sankapalli GP) to help the community form a collective to address the bamboo-mat making, and later the marketing aspect. They were introduced to the nuances of forming a Producer Company and about Self Help Groups. A Women's Groups consisting of 10 women has been formed; an older defunct SHG of 12 members has also been motivated into action.

The selection of leaders of the group, the opening of bank accounts, and the initiating of thrift activities, etc., has been put on hold until the next visit of the Forum. Two other villages were also visited to get a broader idea of the issues women face in the region.





Due to pandemic and the lock down measures undertaken by both Telengana and Maharashtra governments, and keeping the safety of the local communities in view, the next steps of this mission has been put on hold. However a discussion between the forest department and the Forum is ongoing.

With special thanks to:

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**A full report of the visit and consultation is available
with the NTFP Networking Forum, India.**

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