

The logo consists of the text "NTFP & EP" in white, with a small orange and green leaf icon between the ampersand and the "EP".

NTFP & EP

# Leaf Litter

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Cover photo: leaves of *Dillenia pentagyna*,  
recognised by the strong parallel secondary  
nerves. Found throughout India and southeast  
Asia. Fruit edible.



## The politics of neutrality



*Image courtesy: The Hawk*

On the 20<sup>th</sup> May 2026, the Indian PM Narendra Modi was awarded the Agricola Medal by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, in Rome. It was a “recognition of his exceptional leadership to address food security, sustainable agriculture and rural development in India and at the global level”. The award was given by Dr Qu Dongyu, Director General of FAO. Modi dedicated the honour to Indian farmers and the Indian agricultural scientific community, and said that the honour was a recognition of India’s commitment to human welfare, food security and sustainable development.

Rewinding to September 2020, the Indian Parliament passed three farm laws with hardly any debate, and without consulting even a single farmer’s organisation. It led to protests, with farmers, principally from Punjab and Haryana, marching to Delhi, where they were stopped by the police. The three laws were towards liberalising the agricultural sector and included a) the trade of agricultural produce outside the government *mandis*, which meant no Minimum Support Price for their goods, b) that contract farming be allowed, which would allow private companies to control land and produce, and c) that all private companies can store essential commodities for emergency situations. In all these matters the government has been a buffer to the farmers, and the new laws threatened to expose them to the uncertainties of the market and private players.

The farm Bills were passed in Parliament without sufficient legislative scrutiny and debate, leading to much chaos and disruptions by opposition parties.

The farmers asked for the laws to be repealed, gathering at the outskirts of Delhi. The protest that followed is cited as the **single largest organised protest in human history**, with tens of thousands of farmers and people coming together on the highways that led to Delhi. It is estimated that over the year that it lasted – along with nation-wide strikes and shows of solidarity in other states – about 250 million people were drawn into it. The period of protest was during the pandemic and the farmers’ followed strict protocols, and established long-term camps, that actually won the hearts of the people of Delhi and the world. However, the year was marred with violence; about 700 protesters lost their lives, the causes including extreme weather and accidents, and illnesses and suicides.

Through all this PM Narendra Modi did not directly meet the farmers for negotiations and sent his Union Ministers and officials to do so. It is ironic that he now dedicates the Agricola Medal to the farmers! After more than a year, in November 2021, the farm laws were suddenly repealed in parliament.

Incidentally, during the farmers protests in 2021-22, the FAO remained neutral, not wanting to intervene in India's domestic agricultural policy dispute. It "maintained a cooperative technical and policy relationship with India". It perhaps heeded the Indian government's advise to foreign agencies to stay out of the dispute and not be influenced by misinformation.

I visited the FAO headquarters a few days after Modi did, for an Expert Group Meeting on Forest Foods. The FAO recognises the contribution of forests to food and nutritional security, and seeks a workable definition for 'forest foods' that various countries can use to give more importance to their forests. Though it is quite obvious that forests are a resource base for a diverse variety of foods, encompassing plants, animals and fish, yet they are seen by government agencies and private companies only as a source of timber; in more recent times forests are valued for their ability to sequester carbon.

This superficial understanding of forests assumes that they can be replaced by plantations; it has been pointed out that the increased forest cover over the last years in India is due to plantations. In turn, this has led to the signing off of various tracts of pristine forests all across the country – in the Nicobar islands, in Hasdeo in Chhattisgarh, in Kalahandi and Raygada in Odisha, in the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra, and elsewhere. All these places are inhabited by indigenous peoples and to whom these forests are a food and livelihood base; many of these foods have the potential to improve and increase the national and global food security. In most cases the justification for the impending, or ongoing, destruction of these forest areas is mining, for bauxite, iron and coal and, in the case of Nicobar, the establishment of a port-city.

It would align with FAO's present vision, that sees forests as an important base for food and nutritional security, to be more outspoken against deforestation. And to point out that plantations are very different from natural forests, in their composition as well as their ability to support diverse life forms. It would help greatly if the FAO steps out of its neutral stance and endorses statements that help forest conservation globally.

The shelf-life of neutrality has expired.

MR

# **The story of Korambi village in Chandrapur district, Maharashtra**

Kishore Moghe and the GSMT Team

Korambi is a remote tribal village located about 14 KM from Nagbhid taluka in Chandrapur district. With a population of around 403 people and 98 families, the village is inhabited mainly by the Gond and Mana communities. The livelihood of all families largely depends on agriculture and forest produce. Since most farmers own only small pieces of land, their economic condition remains unstable, and they rely heavily on collecting and selling forest products such as tendu leaves, mahua flowers, charoli seeds, gum, kuda flowers, and mushrooms. Surrounded by dense forests on all sides, the village has very limited employment opportunities outside the forest economy.

In 2017, when the GhodaJhari Wildlife Sanctuary was declared, the Forest Department imposed restrictions on the collection of forest produce, cutting off the villagers' primary source of income. Later, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, rice crops were affected by disease, reducing agricultural production. Migration for work was also impossible during that period. As a result, many families in Korambi faced severe hunger and uncertainty about their future.

During this difficult time, the village elders came together and met Mr. Gunwant Vaidya to seek a solution for their problems. This discussion became the seed of transformation. Under the guidance of Gramin Samassya Mukti Trust Dr. Kishor Moghe, and Rupchand Dakhne from the Vidarbha Livelihood Forum, the village decided to implement the Community Forest Rights granted under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Villagers were informed about their legal rights in Gram Sabha meetings, their doubts were addressed, and collective decision-making was encouraged. Through this process, a historic resolution was passed to independently collect and sell tendu leaves on behalf of the village.

The implementation of this decision was not easy. On the very first day of tendu leaf collection, forest officials opposed the activity. However, the unity, organization, and awareness of their rights among the villagers helped them overcome the struggle. In 2020, the village earned nearly ₹11 lakh from tendu leaf sales, creating significant employment opportunities. Over the next five years, the initiative generated a total income of ₹53 lakh, greatly improving the financial condition of every family. The Gram Sabha wisely utilized this income to establish its own office and strengthen local governance capacity.

The “Sustainable Livelihood and Environmental Protection” project, supported by the Gramin Samassya Mukti Trust, Yavatmal, from December 2025 onwards, further strengthened this transformation. Through this project, awareness about the Forest Rights Act, various training programs, strengthening of the Gram Sabha, and empowerment of the Community Forest Rights Management Committee were carried out. Regular meetings, systematic planning, and transparent decision-making increased both public participation and confidence among villagers. A conservation and management plan for the village was prepared, and planned activities were implemented accordingly.

The village also ensured effective implementation of the Employment Guarantee Scheme. About 2,800 fruit trees were planted across 5 hectares of community forest rights land. The government sanctioned ₹48 lakh for this project, and 14 laborers from the village now receive regular employment at ₹312 per day. Various species such as Kesar mango, sapota (chikoo), custard apple,

amla, jamun, lemon, and jackfruit were planted. The growth of the saplings has been satisfactory, and within just one and a half years, they have reached a good height. Borewells, water supply systems, fencing, and protection from wild animals were also arranged. Importantly, villagers contributed through voluntary labor, making this project not only an economic initiative but also a symbol of social unity.

The success of Korambi village has become an inspiration for neighbouring villages. Villages such as Kasarla, Kitali Mendha, Huma, Khadki, Saragad, Kharbi, and Dhamangaon Chak have also started fruit orchards and bamboo plantations in their Community Forest Rights areas. Every year, Korambi conducts forest fire prevention campaigns with active participation from every family, helping conserve and protect the forest effectively. Today, every family in Korambi earns a regular income from tendu leaves, mahua flowers, and other forest produce. The village is now planning future initiatives such as eco-tourism, forest produce processing industries, and local employment generation programs. Youth from the village have already received training and are preparing themselves for these new opportunities.

Through collective efforts, proper guidance, and effective use of government schemes, Korambi village has transformed its future. Democratic decision-making through the Gram Sabha, transparency, unity, and development in harmony with nature have become the foundation of this success. The experiment of creating fruit orchards in the forest and generating employment through forest rights has truly become “gold emerging from the forest.” Today, Korambi is not just a village but an inspiring model of sustainable development. The story of Korambi’s work has spread far and wide, and administrative officers, representatives of Gram Sabhas, and various social organizations regularly visit the village to appreciate and learn from its achievements.



*Gramin Samasya Mukti Trust (GSMT) is based in Yavatmal, Maharashtra*

# **Manakudi Mangrove Restoration Programme: a SEEDS Trust initiative**

P. Muthusamy and the SEEDS Trust Team

## **1. Introduction**

In the wake of the devastating 2004 tsunami, SEEDS Trust recognized the urgent need to restore coastal ecosystems ravaged by both natural disasters and decades of unsustainable human developmental activities. Primarily, it identified 240 hectares of land along the Pandiyar, Palaiyaru and Punakayal estuaries in the southern coasts of Tamil Nadu and planted 1.2 million mangrove saplings on it. For continuing mangrove regeneration without any lacuna, it launched an innovative venture in mangrove mass culture and reforestation by establishing a specialized mangrove nursery in Manakudi, located at the Palaiyaru Estuary near the Bird Watch Tower. By actively engaging local community members, the nursery maintains a consistent, high-quality supply of saplings required for large-scale coastal reforestation. With the passage of time, the saplings have grown into a dense mangrove forest sheltering different species of birds, bats and squirrels.



**Milestone Achievements during the period 2023–2025**

- **Estuarine Restoration:** SEEDS Trust identified 90 hectares of high-potential land along the Manakudi-Palaiyaru estuaries in Kanniyakumari district and successfully planted 272,000 mangrove saplings that have now matured into a dense forest canopy.
- **Terrestrial & Dune Greenery:** Planted 73,500 saplings of diverse fruit and timber tree species across sand dunes, local schools, and households, bringing the total planting initiative to 345,500 saplings.
- **Livelihood Diversification:** SEEDS Trust have ensured sustainable economic opportunities for 150 households from both coastal and inland communities by providing professional skill training in beekeeping, coir rope making and traditional thatch-making.



### **Ecological Transformation**

These restored forests now serve as critical habitats for diverse wildlife, including thousands of bats and numerous species of migratory and exotic birds. Notably, the sand dune afforestation has triggered a return of nesting sea turtles. Following verified hatchings at the base of these dunes, the local government officially designated the zone as a protected turtle hatchery.

### **Partnerships & Funding**

This ecological milestone was made possible through the generous financial backing of Up2Green Reforestation. Essential localized support was rendered by the Manakudi Panchayat, local fishermen's associations, and women's self-help groups (SHGs), who contributed vital voluntary labor and protected the dune saplings from stray cattle grazing.

**Key Behavioral Shift:** Community awareness regarding coastal conservation has risen sharply. Local populations now actively protect the beaches from plastic dumping, avoid throwing waste in public spaces, and have significantly reduced livestock grazing on fragile sand dunes.

## **2. Site Description and Ecological Context:**

### **2.1 Location and Setting:**

The SEEDS Trust Mangrove Nursery spans 0.5 acres in the coastal village of Manakudi, Kanniyakumari District, Tamil Nadu. Positioned adjacent to the Palaiyaru Estuary Bird Watch

Tower, the site sits at a dynamic intersection of riverine and marine environments. This active brackish-water system provides the ideal hydrological and salinity regimes required for robust mangrove propagation.



## 2.2 Local Environmental Characteristics

The nursery site features rich, muddy alluvial soil, routine seasonal tidal flooding, and high concentrations of organic matter. With ambient temperature and humidity remaining remarkably stable throughout the year, the microclimate provides a highly conducive environment for seed germination and early sapling development.

## 3. Cultivated Mangrove Species

To ensure maximum survival rates and structural resilience against wave action, the nursery actively propagates eight primary mangrove species, each serving a unique ecological niche:

| S.No | Botanical Name               | Common Name           | Ecological Role & Characteristics  |
|------|------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1    | <i>Avicennia marina</i>      | Grey Mangrove         | High salinity tolerance; pioneer species vital for stabilizing inter-tidal mudflats.         |
| 2    | <i>Avicennia officinalis</i> | Indian Mangrove       | Broad ecological range; essential for nutrient cycling and shoreline stabilization.          |
| 3    | <i>Rhizophora apiculata</i>  | Tall-Stilted Mangrove | Notable stilt-root architecture provides structural security and hosts diverse marine fauna. |
| 4    | <i>Rhizophora mucronata</i>  | Loop-Root Mangrove    | Specialized root systems that assist in riverbank stabilization and wave attenuation.        |

|   |                              |                        |  |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| 5 | <i>Ceriops decandra</i>      | Yellow Mangrove        | Thrives in middle tidal zones; highly adaptable to fluctuating salinity; compact growth.                         |
| 6 | <i>Bruguiera cylindrica</i>  | Small-fruited Mangrove | Major constituent of mature forests; forms dense canopies and binds soil with knee-roots.                        |
| 7 | <i>Bruguiera gymnorrhiza</i> | Large-leafed Mangrove  | Large tree species facilitating complex ecological relationships and long-term carbon storage.                   |
| 8 | <i>Ceriops tagal</i>         | Spurred Mangrove       | Propagated opportunistically based on seed availability; ideal for mixed plantations in moderately saline soils. |

## 4. Seed Collection and Propagation Techniques

### 4.1 Seed Collection Strategy

Operating in strict compliance with the rules and regulations of the Forest Departments of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, SEEDS Trust sources high-quality propagules (mangrove seeds) from the diverse donor forests of Pichavaram, Muthupet, Valinokkam, and Ashtamudi.

Collected propagules undergo meticulous sorting, cleaning, and preservation under controlled, shaded conditions to maintain maximum viability. The Trust maintains comprehensive metadata logs tracking collection timelines, geographic provenance, and baseline germination competency.



### 4.2 Water and Propagation Management

The nursery utilizes a traditional, highly effective bund-based cultivation method. Saplings are arranged in shallow, segmented mud bunds that facilitate a controlled exchange of natural tidal waters. This design maintains appropriate salinity gradients while preventing dangerous water stagnation.

While certain species are sown directly into prepared nursery beds, specialized species are raised in propagation trays and poly-bags. Continuous monitoring routines are enforced to prevent insect infestations and fungal outbreaks.

## 5. Nutrient and Soil Optimization

Field observations revealed that mangrove saplings exhibit accelerated growth and develop vastly superior root architectures when raised in iron-enriched mud. To leverage this naturally, SEEDS Trust sources silted iron ore residues from local waste-management centers, transforming a byproduct into a powerful soil conditioner.



5.1

### Application Technique

The salvaged iron ore residue is thoroughly refined, sieved, and blended with organic compost and estuarine soil at a strict 1:4 ratio before being applied to the nursery beds. This composite matrix functions as a slow-release nutrient source and a natural pH stabilizer, improving soil aeration and root respiration.

### 5.2 Observed Technical Benefits

- Significant increase in seedling growth rates and leaf chlorophyll content.
- Enhanced structural strength of the root system, drastically increasing post-transplantation survival rates in the wild.
- Higher biological resistance to fungal pathogens due to an improved soil redox ratio.
- Complete elimination of chemical fertilizers, establishing a truly organic, circular-economy production model.

## 6. Water Management and Salinity Control

Brackish water is drawn directly from the adjacent estuary into the nursery channels, ensuring that the ambient salinity perfectly matches the natural target environment. Tidal influxes are regulated via manually engineered bunds, which control velocity and water volume during high tides.

This tide-aided irrigation system maintains optimal soil moisture and salinity balances while eliminating any reliance on external freshwater sources. Field teams conduct periodic salinity testing (measured in parts per thousand, ppt) to execute species-specific hydrological adjustments, ensuring high-salinity species like *Avicennia marina* and lower-salinity species like *Bruguiera gymnorrhiza* receive targeted care.



7.

### **Production Capacity and Scalability**

With an ongoing capacity to maintain 600,000 saplings simultaneously, the SEEDS Trust Mangrove Nursery stands as one of the largest community-based conservation nurseries in the region. Given an average propagation cycle of six to eight months, the facility is uniquely positioned to supply multiple large-scale coastal restoration projects annually.

Propagation density is carefully managed to prevent overcrowding, ensuring uniform sunlight penetration and cross-aeration for every seedling. Routine maintenance frameworks—including systematic pruning, re-bagging, and thinning—ensure a consistently healthy, resilient stock.

## **7. Broad Environmental and Community Impacts**

### **7.1 Ecological Contributions**

The nursery plays a pivotal role in local coastal defense and ecosystem rehabilitation by:

- Formidably mitigating coastal and riverbank soil erosion.
- Revitalizing critical estuarine habitats for commercial fish, crabs, and migratory birds.
- Establishing robust long-term carbon sinks to optimize regional carbon sequestration.
- Enhancing estuarine nutrient loads and facilitating sediment stabilization.

### **Social and Economic Benefits**

#### **Social Benefits**

The regeneration programme has driven profound, long-term social changes across the coastal communities, transforming local residents from resource consumers into active environmental stewards.

- **Community Empowerment and Ownership:** By centering operations around local fishermen, youth volunteers, and women's self-help groups (SHGs), the project has fostered a deep sense of shared ownership. This collective responsibility ensures the long-term protection of the forest without relying on enforcement.
- **Women's Socio-Economic Advancement:** The integration of women's SHGs into seed collection, nursery maintenance, and alternative livelihood training has elevated women's financial independence and decision-making roles within their households and the broader community.
- **Enhanced Coastal Safety and Peace of Mind:** Having lived through the devastating 2004 tsunami, coastal communities experience genuine psychological relief and a heightened sense of safety knowing that a robust, natural bioshield (the matured mangrove forest and stabilized sand dunes) protects their villages from severe gales and storm surges.
- **Behavioral Shift in Environmental Sanitation:** The program has successfully mitigated local pollution. Heightened community awareness has led to a major reduction in plastic littering, beach dumping, and destructive livestock grazing on fragile dune systems.
- **Educational and Scientific Value:** The nursery acts as a living laboratory and regional exposure hub. It provides hands-on educational opportunities for university students, local schools, ecologists, and social activists, advancing climate literacy across the region.



### **Economic Benefits**

Beyond environmental restoration, the mangrove ecosystem functions as a vital economic engine, directly securing and diversifying coastal incomes.

- **Revitalization of Artisanal Fisheries:** Mangroves act as critical marine nurseries, providing shelter and nutrients for commercial fish, prawns, and crabs. The restoration of the Palaiyaru and Pandiyar estuaries has directly rebounded local fish stocks, boosting the daily catches and long-term income security of local fishermen.
- **Livelihood Diversification via Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs):** To reduce economic dependency on volatile marine catches, SEEDS Trust has trained inland and coastal communities in alternative trades:

- o **Apiculture (Beekeeping):** Utilizing mangrove blossoms to produce high-value mangrove honey, creating a stable, alternative income stream.
- o **Thatch-making & Traditional Crafts:** Utilizing sustainably harvested materials to generate local revenue.
- **Protection of Public and Private Infrastructure:** As natural buffers, the regenerated mangroves and sand dunes reduce the costly infrastructure damage typically caused to boats, nets, shoreline homes, and public roads by seasonal monsoonal flooding and high-velocity waves. This acts as a form of natural, cost-free insurance for the community.
- **Potential for Blue Carbon Financing:** With 200 hectares already restored and an additional 1,500 hectares identified for expansion, the project is positioned to enter the global blue carbon market. Quantifying this carbon storage opens the door to international carbon credit revenue, offering long-term self-sustainability for the Trust and the community.
- **Direct Local Employment:** The physical operations of the nursery—which maintains 100,000 to 300,000 saplings—creates consistent, direct paid labor for local community members involved in bagging, watering, scaling, and transplanting logistics.



### Summary Matrix for Funding Proposals

When pitching to corporate CSR partners or international donors, this concise breakdown illustrates the project's holistic return on investment:

| <b>Benefit Category</b> | <b>Direct Output</b>                 | <b>Long-Term Impact</b>  |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Social</b>           | Engagement of women's SHGs and youth | Gender equity, community resilience, and climate-literate youth.       |
| <b>Safety</b>           | Realization of a natural bio-shield  | Mitigated natural disaster risks for vulnerable shoreline settlements. |

|                   |   |   |
|-------------------|---|---|
| <b>Economic</b>   | Recovery of estuarine marine habitats       | Increased daily revenue for local fishing families.               |
| <b>Innovation</b> | Beekeeping and circular iron-ore composting | Financial self-reliance through a green, waste-to-wealth economy. |

## 7.2 Community Ownership

By actively integrating local fishermen, women’s self-help groups, and youth volunteers into seed collection, nursery upkeep, and field planting, SEEDS Trust has successfully transformed coastal inhabitants into long-term environmental stewards. This deep sense of local ownership directly protects the reforested zones from human interference.



8.3

### Academic and Exposure Value

The facility serves as an outdoor educational lab for university students, environmental ecologists, and social activists studying the structural mechanics of coastal defense and blue carbon ecosystems. To build upon this, SEEDS Trust is actively seeking collaborative academic partnerships to systematically measure and quantify the precise carbon sequestration rates within the Manakudi plantations.

## 8. Operational Challenges and Adaptive Management

Despite its strong success, the nursery navigates several persistent environmental challenges:

- **Tidal & Seed Volatility:** Changing seasonal tidal patterns occasionally disrupt salinity balances, while seed availability fluctuates based on the fruiting cycles of donor forests.
- **Weed and Algae Proliferation:** Excessive algal blooms in the primary waterways require continuous, labor-intensive manual clearance.

- **Monsoonal Risks:** Heavy monsoon flooding poses a seasonal threat to basic nursery infrastructure.

**Adaptive Interventions:** In response, the Trust has engineered reinforced bund designs, expanded its internal seed storage facilities, and deployed community-based monitoring teams. Future upgrades will include the integration of automated environmental data loggers and solar-powered water pumps to introduce smart, real-time climate monitoring.



10.

### **Future Horizons and Strategic Plan**

SEEDS Trust has drafted a clear roadmap to scale its operations into a regional model for climate change mitigation:

- **Regional Center of Excellence:** Transition of the Manakudi site into a recognized regional training center for mangrove silviculture and coastal resource management.
- **Smart Nursery Infrastructure:** Deploy satellite-linked data tracking systems to monitor sapling growth quality and log macro-environmental variables like weather and seasonal shifts.
- **Mangrove Seed Bank:** Establish a localized seed bank to preserve genetic diversity and facilitate propagule exchange with global restoration networks.
- **Quantitative Carbon Analytics:** Adopt advanced methodology and technology to precisely measure and monetize Blue Carbon Sequestration.
- **Strategic Expansion:** Leverage data from a recent baseline study that identified 1,500 hectares of high-potential coastal land at the Thamiraparani Estuary in Punnakayal. SEEDS Trust has already established an operational field office and a secondary nursery at this location to spearhead immediate expansion.

### **9. Conclusion and Current Funding Call**

The Manakudi Mangrove Nursery stands as a highly successful, scalable and replicable model of community-driven ecological restoration. It proves that localized, scientifically guided initiatives can achieve sweeping environmental results when paired with active community engagement.

Currently, the Manakudi nursery holds a robust stock of 120,000 ready-to-transplant mangrove saplings and associated coastal species. SEEDS Trust is actively seeking corporate CSR partnerships, international grant funding, and philanthropic support to finance the large-scale

transplantation of these saplings into both the Manakudi and Thamiraparani estuaries, driving forward the global mission of blue carbon sequestration and climate resilience.



*SEEDS Trust is based in Dindigul district Tamil Nadu*

## **Bridging traditional and scientific knowledge through plant diversity mapping**

*Ramgulam Sinha and the Prerak Team*

Plant diversity is increasingly under threat due to deforestation, unsustainable harvesting, and climate variability. In the forest landscapes of Chhattisgarh, these challenges are particularly evident, making systematic conservation approaches more urgent than ever. A recent training on plant diversity mapping demonstrated how combining scientific methodologies with traditional ecological knowledge can provide a powerful framework for sustainable forest management.



The session began with a comprehensive introduction to Plant Diversity mapping, led by Madhu Ramnath who contextualized the importance of documenting plant species. Participants were introduced to the quadrat method, a widely used scientific technique that involves dividing a study area into fixed plots to systematically record plant species. This approach enables researchers to assess species distribution, density, and diversity patterns with accuracy and consistency. One of the key ecological concepts discussed was the species–area relationship. Participants observed that initial sampling plots tend to yield a large number of new species; however, as more plots are studied, the rate of new species discovery gradually declines, eventually reaching a plateau. This stabilization reflects the ecological maturity and diversity saturation of the forest ecosystem. The session also highlighted how variations in terrain influence vegetation patterns—plateau regions typically support drought-resistant shrubs, plains are dominated by grasses and herbs, while hilly terrains sustain taller tree species. Contextual examples, such as the concentration of Mahua in valley regions, helped participants relate theory to real-world observations.

To strengthen practical understanding, participants engaged in hands-on exercises, including drawing bar graphs and species area curves to visualize field data. The group was strategically divided to maximize learning outcomes. One group, consisting largely of individuals from tribal communities, contributed their extensive traditional knowledge for plant identification and naming. The second group focused on measurement, documentation, and logistical coordination. Rotational participation ensured knowledge exchange and skill-building across both groups.



A

significant highlight of the training was the involvement of “barefoot ecologists”—local village elders possessing deep, experience-based ecological knowledge. These individuals shared insights on plant uses, seasonal variations, medicinal properties, and cultural significance. Their contributions underscored the value of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into formal scientific processes.

The practical field exercise was conducted in a dry deciduous forest landscape, providing an ideal setting for applied learning. Participants established multiple quadrats using simple tools such as measuring tapes and ropes. Within each plot, they followed a structured protocol to document plant species, noting characteristics such as local names, growth stages, and abundance. Despite environmental challenges, including heat and dense vegetation, participants demonstrated strong engagement and teamwork. The findings were both insightful and encouraging. Initial plots recorded a high diversity of species, while subsequent plots showed a gradual stabilization in cumulative species count. Common species observed included Amla, Mahua saplings, Tendu, and Saja, while some seasonal species were absent due to prevailing dry conditions. Local experts further enriched the analysis by identifying species that are declining due to factors such as forest fires and overexploitation.



The training concluded with a collaborative data analysis session, where participants interpreted ecological patterns and developed graphical representations of their findings. Emphasis was placed on the importance of using both local and scientific nomenclature to ensure clarity and consistency in biodiversity documentation.

Overall, the initiative was conducted in Jhalkhamar village forest area of Gariaband district and it successfully demonstrated that plant diversity mapping is most effective when scientific rigor is complemented by traditional knowledge. The program was organised by PRERAK, Chhattisgarh and participants from 8 districts expressed a strong commitment to applying these learnings in their respective communities, contributing to more informed and community-driven conservation efforts.

*PRERAK is based in Rajim and Gariyaband districts, Chhattisgarh*

# One should never take democracy for granted

Paul Wolvekamp

*'Fascism starts with talk, not tanks. With democratic elections, not a coup. And it takes hold thanks to people who think things won't move quickly—until they do just that.'*<sup>1</sup>



The historian Richard J. Evans in his book *The Coming of the Third Reich* argues that Hitler did not overthrow democracy from the outside; rather, he used democratic institutions, elections, and constitutional powers to destroy democracy from within, and established a Nazi dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> Hitler used democratic elections and constitutional procedures to gain power, then exploited emergency powers and the Enabling Act to dismantle democratic checks and establish a one-party dictatorship.

In her book *This is Facism. A Wakeup Call*<sup>3</sup>, Rosan Smits argues that fascism is not merely a historical phenomenon associated with figures such as Hitler and Mussolini, but a political strategy that can reappear in contemporary democratic societies. Smits describes fascism as a roadmap used by far-right leaders, both past and present, to seize power by exploiting feelings of insecurity, fear, and social division among citizens. According to her analysis, democratic institutions are rarely destroyed overnight. Instead, they are gradually weakened until an authoritarian system emerges.

A central theme of the book is that fascist tendencies do not appear suddenly through a military coup or a dramatic revolution. Rather, they are normalized step by step within democratic systems. Smits explains how extreme language, exclusionary ideas, and attacks on democratic norms can slowly become accepted as part of mainstream political debate. Through this process, citizens become accustomed to rhetoric and policies that would previously have been considered unacceptable.

Smits identifies several tactics commonly used by fascist and authoritarian movements. One of the most important is the creation of scapegoats. Political leaders often blame minorities, immigrants, religious groups, or political opponents for complex social and economic problems. At the same time, they sow distrust toward institutions such as the media, universities, the judiciary, and scientific experts. The spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation further undermines public trust and encourages citizens to rely on strong leaders rather than democratic processes. Political opponents are frequently portrayed as enemies of the people or as members of a corrupt “elite” that has betrayed the nation.

Across the Netherlands and other European countries, Smits argues, far-right politicians have spent years cultivating polarization and distrust. By portraying immigration, Islam, “the elite,” or “Brussels” (a reference to the institutions of the European Union) as threats to national identity and sovereignty, they push public debate toward more radical positions. These narratives create a sense of crisis and encourage voters to accept increasingly authoritarian solutions.

1 <https://decorrespondent.nl/16177/this-is-fascism/0d604cd4-7b7f-0f8b-3d68-9540540803d3>

2 Evans, R. J. (2003). *The Coming of the Third Reich*. London: Penguin Books.

3 <https://libris.nl/raadgeepenberrevoets/a/rosan-smits/this-is-fascism/9781805466567>

We see a similar trend in countries like Brazil, Argentina, the US and El Salvador. In my own country, the Netherlands, the political party FvD - ironically an acronym for *Forum for Democracy* - has become associated with anti-Islam rhetoric, antisemitic themes, conspiracy theories such as the Dutch concept of *omvolking* ("replacement theory", i.e. the, predominantly white, Dutch population being replaced by migrants<sup>4</sup>), and a broader far-right agenda. These narratives have served as rallying points for disgruntled citizens and have attracted support from extremist right-wing circles. FvD has aligned itself with extremist parties and forces abroad, including some outspoken neo-Nazis. From the start the party has also adopted a pro-Putin stance, downplaying or ignoring Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine under Vladimir Putin.

Smits' book examines contemporary examples, including former President Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. Smits does not claim that these politicians are identical to the fascist leaders of the twentieth century. Instead, she highlights similarities in their rhetoric, particularly their appeals to a lost national greatness, their criticism of democratic institutions, and their tendency to divide society into "ordinary people" and threatening outsiders. In her book she also stresses that the response of mainstream political parties is crucial. When major liberal or conservative parties adopt elements of far-right rhetoric or cooperate with extremist movements for electoral gain, they contribute to the normalization of anti-democratic ideas. She argues that democratic parties should instead reaffirm core values such as the protection of minorities, the independence of democratic institutions, freedom of expression, the rule of law, and international cooperation.

Former Labour strategist Alastair Campbell and former Conservative minister Rory Stewart frequently discuss the rise of the far right on their highly recommended podcast *The Rest Is Politics*<sup>5</sup>. Drawing on works such as *This Is Fascism*, they warn that populist movements can undermine democratic norms and institutions. While acknowledging that such movements often tap into legitimate concerns - such as the cost of living, unregulated immigration, and cultural change - they argue that the solutions offered are typically simplistic and divisive. A central theme of their podcast is the importance of respectful, fact-based disagreement, and they urge mainstream politicians to address public frustrations directly rather than ceding ground to political extremes. As Filip Milačić argues in *Abandoning Democracy for the Nation* (2026)<sup>6</sup>, democratic and moderate political forces should not leave the language of national interest exclusively to the far right. Instead, they should articulate an inclusive and positive vision of the national interest as a democratic counter-narrative.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, *This is Facism* serves as both a warning and a call to action, urging citizens to remain vigilant and actively defend democracy before authoritarian tendencies become entrenched.

*Paul Wolvekamp is with Both ENDS, Amsterdam.*

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4 In doing so, they overlook the fact that the Netherlands, one of the world's richest and safest countries, owes much of its prosperity and cultural diversity to centuries of migration and the trade, skills, knowledge, art, and cuisine that migrants have brought with them.

5 <https://podcasts.apple.com/cy/podcast/the-rest-is-politics/id1611374685>

6 Milačić, Filip. *Abandoning Democracy for the Nation*. Cambridge Elements in the Politics of Development. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026.

7 Cited in the newspaper article *The country of 10 million* by Caroline de Gruyter in NRC, 6 June 2026.

# Strengthening Documentation Practices: Enhancing Skills in Story-telling, Case Studies, Photography, and Reporting

Ramgulam Sinha and the PRERAK Team



Effective documentation is fundamental to capturing the realities, insights, and impact of grassroots development initiatives. It enables organizations to communicate their work in a structured, coherent, and engaging manner, while ensuring that community voices and field experiences are accurately represented. Strengthening capacities in storytelling, case study development, photography, and report writing is therefore critical to improving the overall quality and impact of documentation.

The session on storytelling focused on enhancing participants' ability to present field experiences in a compelling and meaningful way. Key elements of effective storytelling were introduced, including character background, logical sequencing, contextual clarity, depth of narration, and the articulation of learning or transformation. Emphasis was placed on aligning the narrative tone with the subject and concluding with a strong, impactful message. To contextualize these concepts, our facilitator Madhu Ramnath shared a real-life field experience, demonstrating how lived realities can be transformed into engaging narratives. Participants then practiced by sharing their own stories, enabling them to refine their structure and presentation for greater audience engagement.

The case study writing session addressed common gaps in field-level documentation. Participants were guided on how to develop comprehensive case studies that clearly articulate the core issue, supported by detailed contextual information about the location. This included categorizing the setting (urban, rural, tribal, hilly, or plain) and describing living conditions, such as permanent (pucca) or temporary (kaccha) housing structures. The importance of documenting organizational roles, interventions undertaken, and measurable outcomes was emphasized. Participants were also encouraged to present both positive and negative findings to ensure authenticity and credibility. Through practical exercises, participants developed and presented their own case studies, thereby strengthening their ability to produce structured and analytical documentation.

Photography was introduced as an essential component of visual documentation. The session covered fundamental techniques such as the rule of thirds, effective framing, and the use of grid lines to enhance composition. Participants also gained practical skills in adjusting lighting through basic editing, cropping images for clarity, utilizing night mode in low-light conditions, and applying zoom and burst modes for improved image capture. A hands-on exercise enabled participants to take photographs and present them for peer review.

Constructive feedback, facilitated through projector-based discussions, helped participants identify areas for improvement and refine their visual documentation skills. The overall training methodology was highly interactive and participatory. Theoretical concepts were reinforced through

group discussions, while practical exercises ensured hands-on learning. Participants engaged in both individual and group activities, fostering collaboration and peer learning. The facilitation approach incorporated live demonstrations, strategic group work, and collective review sessions, creating an environment of active engagement and continuous feedback.

As a result of the training, participants from 8 districts of Chhattisgarh State developed a clearer understanding of effective documentation practices. They demonstrated improved ability to craft structured and engaging narratives, produce well-organized case studies, and capture meaningful visual content. These enhanced skills will enable them to document their work more effectively and communicate the realities and impact of grassroots initiatives with greater clarity and influence.

In conclusion, the training underscored that documentation extends beyond the mere recording of information. It is a strategic process of presenting evidence in a manner that is accurate, engaging, and impactful. By integrating storytelling, case study writing, photography, and reporting, participants are now better equipped to strengthen communication and amplify the voices and experiences of the communities they serve.



*PRERAK is based in Rajim and Gariyaband districts of Chhattisgarh*

# Human-Elephant conflict: a case study

*Nawal Sai and ManeeshYadav*

Chhattisgarh is one of the states in India where human society and wild elephants are increasingly coming into conflict. Surguja and Surajpur districts are among the worst affected regions. One such village *Kataroli* is located approximately 68 kilometres from Ambikapur, the district headquarters. The village is surrounded by agricultural fields and dense forests. About 185 families live in the village, with a total population of nearly 576 people. Around 140 hectares of land are used for cultivation. The village is surrounded by forests on all sides, creating a close connection between the villagers and the natural environment. The forests include a variety of trees and wildlife, which play an important role in maintaining an ecological balance.

A small hill located about 2 kilometers west of the village acts as a natural boundary. Several small rivers and streams also flow around the area. Seasonal streams from the hills join larger rivers in the surrounding region. These natural water sources support wildlife and agriculture alike. The movement of wild elephants in this forest region increased significantly around 2004–2005. Initially, a group of about seven elephants entered the nearby forest area and gradually began moving toward agricultural lands and villages in search of food and water.

At first, local people were curious and frightened by the sudden arrival of elephants. Over time, the elephants started damaging crops and entering the settlements at night. Farmers faced heavy losses, and fear spread among the villagers. The forests of district connect with neighbouring forest divisions, creating a large elephant corridor. Elephants travel continuously across these forest regions in search of food and water.

In many villages, forest land has been reduced because of human activities such as tree cutting, road construction, mining, and settlement expansion. As a result, elephants are forced to move closer to human habitations. By 2012, large-scale forest clearing and mining activities had intensified. Trees were cut down, and forest areas were fragmented. This destroyed many natural elephant pathways and habitats. Consequently, elephants increasingly entered agricultural fields and villages.

The destruction of forests also reduced the availability of natural food sources for elephants. Due to this shortage, elephants began feeding on crops such as paddy, maize, and other cultivated plants. This increased the tension between the people and elephants. Wild elephants caused serious destruction in villages. Farmers lost large portions of their crops every year. Houses made of mud and bamboo were also damaged by elephants searching for stored grains.

Several incidents of human deaths and injuries were reported during encounters with elephants. Fear among villagers increased rapidly, especially at night. Many families stayed awake at night to guard their fields and homes. The economic losses were severe. Villagers who depended completely on agriculture struggled to survive after repeated crop destruction. Some people were forced to leave farming or migrate temporarily for wage labour.

The Forest Department and local administration attempted to control the situation through awareness programs, compensation schemes, and elephant monitoring teams. Compensation was provided to some affected families for crop damage, house destruction, and loss of human life. However, many villagers felt that the compensation was insufficient and delayed. Forest officials and local volunteers worked together to drive the elephants away from villages using drums, fire torches, and warning systems. Despite these efforts, the conflict continued because the root causes—forest destruction and habitat loss—remained unresolved.

The conflict between elephants and humans is increasing every year. If forests continue to shrink, the problem will become even more serious in the future. Elephants are wild animals that require large forest areas, water sources, and natural food for survival. When forests are destroyed, elephants naturally move toward villages and agricultural fields. At the same time, rural communities depend heavily on farming and forest resources for their livelihood. This creates direct competition between humans and elephants for land and resources. To reduce this conflict, forest conservation, restoration of elephant corridors, and proper rehabilitation planning are essential. Public awareness and cooperation between local communities and government agencies are also



necessary.

Only through balanced development and environmental protection can peaceful coexistence between humans and elephants be achieved.



*Naval Sai and Manish Yadav are with Margdarshak Sewa Sansthan, Chhattisgarh*

## UPDATES FROM THE FIELD: Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh: April 2026 notes

(from Margdarshak Seva Sansthan and Velugu Trust)

Margdarshak Seva Sansthan continued its community-centered interventions during April 2026 with focus on forest governance, conservation awareness, livelihood enhancement, and community well-being. Activities were conducted across 100 villages with participation from community institutions, women's groups, forest protection committees, and local residents. The report below presents a consolidated overview of the major activities and expected outcomes from the month.

### *Conservation*

Community meetings and forest visits were organized to strengthen forest conservation and sustainable natural resource management practices. Villagers participated in seed collection drives involving indigenous species such as Mahua, Tendu, Arjun, and medicinal plants. Forest protection committees and local youth groups discussed strategies for biodiversity protection, prevention of illegal forest cutting, and long-term forest regeneration. Reforestation monitoring, nursery management, and plant inspection activities were also carried out in collaboration with community members to improve ecological restoration efforts. These interventions helped improve community ownership of forest resources, encouraged local participation in conservation activities, and strengthened the foundation for sustainable environmental management in the region.



### *Advocacy*

The organization facilitated continuous dialogue with village committees, forest rights groups, and traditional leadership structures regarding Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights and governance. Support was provided for village profile preparation, community-level planning, forest management documentation, and discussions related to government welfare schemes and entitlements. Community consultations were also conducted to strengthen institutional coordination and improve awareness regarding forest rights and collective governance systems. These efforts increased awareness about community rights, improved preparedness for CFR-related processes, and strengthened local governance mechanisms within the villages.

### *Livelihoods*

Livelihood-focused activities emphasized sustainable utilization and value addition of non-timber forest produce such as Mahua, Tendu, Chironji, and local forest seeds. Women's groups and village members participated in discussions on forest-based food products, seed collection techniques, local enterprise opportunities, and community-led livelihood systems. Reforestation and nursery activities also contributed to enhancing local skills and promoting community engagement in resource-based enterprises. Livelihood-focused activities also included the preparation and sale of

traditional Sal leaf plates as a source of local income generation. Community members collectively produced approximately 40,000 Sal leaf plates during the reporting period, creating livelihood opportunities for rural households. Mahua collection activities were actively carried out throughout the month, and Mahua was also used within local barter exchange systems in village shops, strengthening traditional economic practices. In addition, the collection of Tendu leaves began during this period, with community members preparing the leaves for sale to government procurement systems where they are further used in the production of beedi cigarettes. Through these initiatives, communities developed greater awareness about sustainable income opportunities, improved understanding of forest produce management, and enhanced participation of women in economic and enterprise-related activities.

### *Culture / Health*

Community interactions during the month highlighted the importance of traditional ecological knowledge, local food systems, and collective cultural practices. Meetings encouraged the use of indigenous forest foods for nutrition and household well-being while also promoting traditional community cooperation and decision-making systems. Awareness sessions related to social welfare, nutrition, and community health were integrated into village-level discussions and women's group meetings. These activities contributed to strengthening social cohesion, reviving traditional knowledge systems, and improving awareness regarding nutrition, health, and collective well-being.

Overall, the interventions carried out by Margdarshak Seva Sansthan during April 2026 reflected community participation and collaboration in the areas of conservation, advocacy, livelihood development, and social well-being. The combined efforts of village institutions, women's groups, and local communities contributed toward sustainable resource management, community empowerment, and long-term ecological resilience.

(Compiled by Manish Yadav for Margdarshak Sewa Sansthan)

### **Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh**



PACDR Training at Sundarayya Guda Village

A Training program on Participatory Assessment of Climate and Disaster Risk (PACDR) was conducted at Sundarayya Guda village. During the program, villagers actively participated in identifying local risks and vulnerabilities and prepared a community action plan to address climate and disaster-related challenges.

### **“What Next?” Program for Tribal Students**



A guidance program titled “What Next?” was conducted for 10th and Intermediate tribal students at Ippaguda village and Velugu Association office. The program focused on creating awareness about higher education opportunities, career options, and skill development pathways to support students in making informed future decisions.

## Millets Training and Awareness Program



A training and awareness program on millets cultivation and utilization was conducted at Gorapadu village and Kommalaguda village. The program highlighted the nutritional importance of millets, climate resilience, and sustainable farming practices to promote millet-based livelihoods among tribal farmers.

### FRA and Habitat Rights Training



Training sessions on Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Habitat Rights were conducted for committee members at Lovaguda, Rimpi, and Eguva Dwarabandham villages. The sessions aimed to strengthen awareness on community rights, legal provisions, and effective implementation of habitat rights for tribal communities.

### Program

### Habitat Rights Team Visit and Official



Habitat Rights team visit and official program was conducted at Eguva Dwarabandham village. Participants from Eguva, Nadimi, and Diguva Dwarabandham villages attended the program. The visit focused on reviewing habitat rights implementation, facilitating discussions with officials, and strengthening community participation.

### PACDR Training for Mobilisers and Youth

A two-day PACDR training program was conducted for mobilisers and youth at Velugu Association

office. The training focused on climate risk assessment, disaster preparedness, and community-level planning to build resilience among tribal youth and grassroots workers.



### Cause and Effect Training for FPO Leaders

A Cause and Effect training program was conducted for Farmer Producer Organization (FPO) leaders. The training aimed to improve analytical and

decision-making skills by helping leaders understand problem identification, root cause analysis, and effective planning for organizational development.

### Turmeric Value Addition Training



A training program on turmeric value addition was conducted at Konduru village. The session focused on processing techniques such as cleaning, boiling, drying, and polishing of turmeric, along with value-added product preparation like turmeric powder. The training aimed to enhance farmers' income by improving product quality, market value, and promoting small-scale processing practices among tribal farmers.

(compiled by Sanjeevi Rao for Velugu Trust)

# Envisioning Community-Based Conservation and Sustainable Village Development

Deepak Pani

## Introduction

A four-day workshop and exposure visit on “*Envisioning Community-Based Conservation and Sustainable Village-Based Development*” was organized from 22nd to 25th May 2026 at CYSD, Bhubaneswar, Dengajhari Village and Sambhav, Nayagarh, Odisha. The programme was facilitated by Gram Swaraj in collaboration with PRERAK, Chhattisgarh and NTFP- Networking Forum, India with the objective of strengthening community understanding on forest conservation, biodiversity protection, sustainable agriculture, traditional knowledge systems, and village-based development models.

The workshop and exposure visit brought together thirty participants, including fifteen women, fifteen men, six youths among whom nine villagers belonged to two blocks of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha. The programme aimed to create a space for collective learning through discussions, participatory exercises, field exposure, and interaction with successful community-led conservation initiatives.

## Day 1: Orientation and Participatory Learning at CYSD, Bhubaneswar

The participants arrived at CYSD, Bhubaneswar on 23rd May early in the morning. The workshop formally began at 9:00 AM with an introductory session led by Mr. Deepak Pani, Secretary of Gram Swaraj, who explained the objectives and significance of the exposure visit.

An interactive self-introduction session was conducted where participants introduced themselves not merely through their names and villages, but by sharing one tree, forest food, or bird they emotionally connected with and the reasons behind it. The exercise became an effective icebreaker and also reflected participants’ understanding of local biodiversity, endangered species, and traditional ecological knowledge. Many participants expressed concern over the gradual disappearance of peacocks, birds, and forest resources due to increasing deforestation and human intervention.

A participatory village profiling exercise was later conducted where participants, grouped village-wise, prepared presentations covering population, geography, forest dependency, livelihood practices, natural resources, traditional systems, strengths, and local challenges. The activity enabled participants to understand the socio-economic and ecological realities of different villages and provided facilitators with a broader understanding of the intervention areas.

Before lunch, participants shared stories connected with forests, land, and traditional livelihoods, highlighting the deep emotional and cultural relationship communities maintain with nature. A documentary on Hiware Bazar, known for its successful water conservation and community-led development initiatives, was screened. Participants related the experiences shown in the film with

the conditions of their own villages and reflected on the possibility of collective transformation through community participation.

In the afternoon, participants visited Nandankanan Botanical Park to understand the distinction between natural forests and human-made plantations. Discussions were held on biodiversity, ecological balance and wildlife conservation. Participants observed differences between natural ecosystems and controlled environments and reflected on the health and freedom of animals living in artificial settings. The day concluded with dinner and overnight stay at CYSD, Bhubaneswar.

Day 2: Exposure Visit to Dengajhari Village and Sambhav, Nayagarh

On the second day, participants travelled to Dengajhari village in Ranapur Block of Nayagarh district, Odisha. The village is widely recognized for its women-led forest conservation initiative and the community institution known as *Bana Kutira*.

The village, consisting of nearly twenty-five households situated at the foothills of the forest, depends largely on forest resources for livelihood. Community elders explained that the present condition of the forest was the result of years of collective struggle. During the late twentieth century, continuous timber smuggling and indiscriminate cutting transformed the once green forest into a barren and degraded landscape. Wildlife disappeared, streams dried up, and ecological balance was severely disturbed.

Initially, men from the village attempted to protect the forest collectively, but the effort weakened over time. Later, women took leadership in reviving forest protection through sustained collective action. Despite resistance from timber smugglers and neighbouring villagers dependent on forest extraction, the women continued their efforts with determination. Over time, the forest regenerated, streams revived, wildlife returned, and biodiversity gradually improved. The regenerated forest once again became a source of livelihood through the collection of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) such as kendu leaves, sal leaves, siali leaves, and various tubers.

Participants also understood about the traditional forest protection practice known as “*Tengha Pali*,” where a stick circulates from one household to another, symbolizing the turn of a household to guard the forest. This rotational system reflects strong collective responsibility and community ownership over forest protection. The interaction with the women’s group inspired participants to reflect on similar conservation possibilities in their own villages.

Following the visit, the participants travelled nearly 60 kilometres to Sambhav, Nayagarh. Sambhav is spread across nearly ninety acres and is known for ecological restoration, biodiversity conservation, traditional seed preservation, and organic agriculture. Participants learned about the vision of Late Prof. Radha Mohan, an economist and social activist, who transformed the once barren and ecologically degraded laterite land into a biodiversity-rich ecosystem through sustained ecological efforts and community participation with his daughter Sabarmati and a small team.

At Sambhav, participants explored organic farming practices, indigenous seed conservation, preparation of organic manure and bio-inputs, and biodiversity restoration models. The initiative has conserved nearly 650 indigenous paddy varieties along with several local vegetable species and endangered plants. Participants were introduced to traditional organic formulations such as Garudastra and Panchatikta used for crop protection and soil fertility management. The exposure challenged the common perception that traditional seeds produce lower yields and strengthened participants’ confidence in sustainable and ecological agriculture practices.

### Day 3: Organic Agriculture, Reflection and Youth Engagement

On the following day, participants interacted with Ms. Sabarmati, a key member associated with the development of Sambhav. She shared her experiences of transitioning from chemical-based agriculture to organic farming and discussed the ecological and health impacts of unsustainable agricultural practices. Participants engaged in detailed discussions on pest management, soil fertility, traditional seed preservation, and water conservation.

The interaction reinforced the importance of sustainable food systems and ecological farming practices. Participants collectively reflected on the slogan “*Bhala Khaiba, Bhala Khuaiba*” (“Eat good food, Serve good food”), which symbolized the larger vision of healthy and sustainable living.

On 25th May, participants returned to CYSD, Bhubaneswar, where a reflection and action-planning session was organized. Participants shared their key learnings and discussed possible initiatives for their villages, including conservation of endangered plant species, preservation of indigenous paddy and vegetable seeds, strengthening forest protection systems, and promotion of organic agriculture. Several participants also shared the traditional paddy varieties they intended to cultivate in the coming agricultural season.

A separate discussion was organized with youth participants to understand their perspectives on forests, biodiversity, and village development. The interaction reflected a growing interest among the youth towards conservation and sustainable livelihoods and highlighted the importance of involving younger generations in long-term community-based ecological initiatives.

### Key Learnings and Conclusion

The workshop and exposure visit created an important platform for collective learning, reflection, and inspiration. The programme highlighted that community participation remains central to successful forest conservation and ecological restoration. It also demonstrated the transformative role of women’s leadership, the continued relevance of traditional knowledge systems, and the importance of organic agriculture and indigenous seeds in ensuring ecological sustainability and livelihood security. The experiences of Dengajhari and Sambhav showed that degraded landscapes can be regenerated through collective effort, ecological sensitivity, and community ownership. The exposure visit encouraged participants to critically reflect on the condition of their own forests and villages while imagining locally relevant conservation and development strategies rooted in biodiversity conservation, traditional practices, and sustainable livelihoods.



Photographs of the Gram Swaraj workshop and training

## Wings of Vietnam: field notes from the Hoang Lien Son mountains

Satheesh Muthu Gopal

Sapa is a small hill station, located in the Hoang Lien Son Mountains of Vietnam, in the north of the country. This small town is located at 1600 metres above sea level and surrounded by hills. The small lake at the centre of the town, the pavement laid around the lake for people to walk, beautiful gardens around the town, soaring trees, misty evenings, busy tourists enjoying their shopping on the streets, and the chirping of small birds all resemble Kodaikanal, which is located in the southern part of India. I visited Sapa for a few days and got to experience the nature around this place.

Ham Rong Garden is a hillock located very close to the town, with trees, shrubs, orchid gardens and other ornamental plants. In Vietnamese Ham Rong means Dragon's Jaw and the botanical garden gets its name as the rock on top of this hill resembles one. The hillock has steep stones, making it difficult to trek; however, I felt it was worth climbing as I found many bird species, some of which are found only in the Himalayas. I had gone through the list of bird species recorded in Sapa during spring and prepared my own wish list to find them. I visited this place early one morning during my stay in Sapa. It was misty, and I could hardly see anything beyond a hundred meters. Hoping that the clouds would clear, I started walking up the hill. Around 7.00 a.m, the mists were gone, but still there was not enough sunlight to see the small birds hanging around the canopies. All I could hear were their songs and the silhouette of the fast-moving passerines. With less opportunity to see the birds at eye level in good light, I was patiently looking for a suitable open area where I could get better light. The trunks of the trees and rock surfaces were covered with lichens.

I reached the centre of the garden, where many vibrant-coloured flowering plants were cultivated. The flower garden was surrounded by trees and shrubs. The more light in the open helped me to find the bird species around that area. There are several Tit species found in these mountains, and I was fortunate to see three of them: Asian Tit, Green-backed Tit and Black-throated Tit. The gregarious Black-throated Tits were eye-catching with their attractive, colourful feathers. Those tiny birds were foraging on the barren branches of a small tree and hanging around acrobatically. One of the Tit's brought a caterpillar from somewhere to the branch. It held one end of the caterpillar tightly in its beak and pounded it on the branch multiple times before eating it. The Tits ignored my presence and continued their activities on that busy morning.

After a while, along with the Tits, I found a Rufous-capped Babbler busy building its nest. It was building its nest with the hanging mosses from the tree, rolling it over on the thin branch. I was hoping to see more birds in that location, so I decided to stick around that place and started looking for more species. A bird slightly larger than a Tit grabbed my attention on the same tree where the Tits were foraging. It was a beautiful Blue-winged Minla. I was able to take pictures of all these small birds. Thanks to the clear sky, there was more visibility on one side of the densely forested hillock. I heard a call from there, something new, but also something familiar, as I had heard that call before. It piqued my curiosity, and I keenly searched the vegetation. I was paid for my patience: I saw a stunning blue bird with a long tail and a scarlet bill come out of the thicket and fly to the other side of the hillock. It was followed by another one, and they both vanished from sight. They were Red-billed Blue-Magpies, whose calls are similar to the Rufous Treepie.

After watching all these spectacular birds, I roamed around the garden for a few more hours and observed 20 species. A pair of Rusty-capped Fulvetta, a lone Hill Prinia and many other birds showered me with lifers that day. On the same day, I visited a village called Cat-Cat. This village is one of the tourist attractions, exhibiting cultural values of Vietnam with traditional costumes,



Black-throated Tit (lft) and Stately Nawab (rt)



Rufous-capped Babbler (lft) Rusty-capped Fulvetta (rt)

handicrafts and food, etc. Nevertheless, the location of the village inspired me, as there is a river flowing through the place with dense vegetation and waterfalls alongside. I was targeting two bird species, the Little fork-tail and the Plumbeous Redstart, as both were recorded in this village. After an hour of walking along the river, I found a Plumbeous Redstart swaying its tail, perched atop a rock. A pair of Stately Nawab butterflies were mud puddling on the bank of the river. While climbing back up the valley to the main road, I noticed that the path was planted with Queen's Wreath and Princess Flower plants. Despite the evidence of nature's beauty through the birds, butterflies and flowers, this tourist place is rapidly getting commercialised. The construction of new buildings, roads, and new tourist attractions, are destroying these beautiful landscapes. After going through the complete list of bird sightings in Vietnam, there is one common bird that I missed, which I see the world over. It was the crow!

Satheesh Muthu Gopal is an independent writer and environmentalist

# Leaf and Flower Flush

This refers to the time of a synchronised burst of new leaves and flowers in a plant. The phenomenon abruptly changes the character of the forest or area where it occurs, with new fragrances, arrival of insects and birds, and overall appearance. The photographs show a few plants with a leaf or flower flush.



*Clematis trilobata*



*Ventilago maderaspatana*



*Celtis tetrandra*



*Diploclisia glaucescens* (leaves)



*Diploclisia glaucescens* (flower buds)



*Anamirta cocculus*



# NON-TIMBER FOREST PRODUCTS EXCHANGE PROGRAM NETWORKING FORUM, INDIA

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