ADIVASI WOMEN TRAIN YOUTH ON FOREST FOODS IN INDIA

NTFP EXCHANGE PROGRAMME NETWORKING FORUM INDIA
REPORT OF THE WORKSHOP ON INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE ON WILD FOODS

PHCC CENTRE,
KUDHRAIYAR, TAMIL NADU;

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2021 BACKGROUND

The Palliyar settlement at Kudhraiyar is about 40 years old and was the result of the people being displaced from the hills below Kukkal in the Palani hillslopes. Other Palliyar settlements are to be found around the Palar dam, Manthittam, the Amaravathy dam and the the hills around the Pappampatti panchayat.
The PHCC centre at Kudhraiyar has also been the space where an initial attempt at a wild food nursery was attempted. This was with the help and support of the people in the settlement nearby; the people regularly wander the hills (which was their former home) on journeys to procure various NTFPs as well as to fish, to collect tubers and wild fruit, and have an intricate knowledge of the terrain. Some of the wild food species in the nursery are from the surrounding hills.

Over the past few years interactions with the Palliyar people in the Kudhraiyar area made one realize that though the older generation retained much of their knowledge about wild foods (which includes collection, processing, cooking) this knowledge is seldom or not passed on to the younger people. In addition the influx of the market, processed foods, fast foods and also the other influences of modernity, have combined to delink the younger people from their food traditions. These observations gave us reason to attempt a workshop that brings together the older and younger generation of the Palliyar around the Kudhraiyar region and facilitate an exchange around food in general and wild foods in particular.

THE WORKSHOP

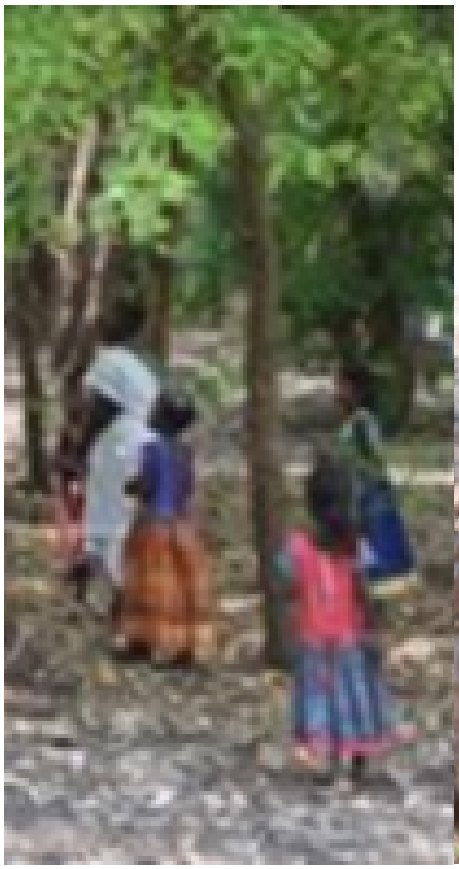
The day began with a round of introductions and the naming of their favorite wild food; most of them also talked a little about their overall circumstance – their habitation, the ration food that they are now eating, the lack of easy and free access to the forest that surrounds them.

Wild foods on display during the workshop

THE CONVERSATION

The older women in the group – teachers of the session – began by naming various foods, beginning with leaves that are edible, about 15 of them. And then several forest fruit were named and described, about 20 of them. And then the tubers, about 7 of them. The younger people sat on another side, in a separate group, and responded as each food item was named. The response fell into one of several categories: a. don't know, never heard of it, b. don't know, but heard of it, c. know it, have eaten it, but cant identify it in the wild, d. know it, can identify it in the wild, etc., and going into the knowledge of it's processing, the cooking and the recipes. This session which lasted 2-3 hours was the theoretical part of the workshop.

The latter part of the session was spent in the forest, the older people leading the youth and the children, in small groups. These were intense but enjoyable teaching sessions and my/PHCC's role was in facilitation, with questions that remained unasked, in finding out whether certain plants were available in other areas (that some of the participants came from). Some of the foods were brought back for either the nursery/planting or for immediate cooking for the meal ahead.



"What's that?" Outdoor teaching and learning exchange with youth and adults

LESSONS LEARNED

It became quite clear that there was a gap in knowledge between generations within the Palliyar community but also that the younger generation were keen to learn from their elders and bridge the gap. Conversely, the elders too were happy to teach and pass on what they knew to the younger people. However, apart from these 'agreements' the issue of forest access loomed large over the community as a whole; the authorities were a major obstacle in allowing the Palliyar people a free access to the forest for gathering NTFPs which includes food. Some of the smaller groups of the community were simply landless and 'forestless'; their primary need was land titles, a place to call their own.

In a sense the wild food workshop opened graver issues that need to be addressed alongside the transfer of indigenous knowledge (in this case about wild foods). This will require more discussions with the people and mediating or facilitating between these communities and the local authorities. Another workshop, taking into account the present outcomes, will be held within the next 3-4 months; smaller discussions will, however, continue in the short-term.

"You don't return empty handed from the forest"