

Bhimashankar Tribes Take Destiny in Hand

Author - Himanshu Nitnaware, Published on - 21.2.2019

Two villages around sanctuary, roped in under govt scheme, work with forest officials and NGO to reduce dependency on forest produce, protect their area and learn new livelihoods



In a unique step that shows them attempting to take charge of their own destinies, around 200 tribals living in and around Bhimashankar sanctuary have drafted a plan to map the biodiversity of their area, besides working closely with the forest department and a Pune-based NGO to reduce their dependency on forest produce.

Villagers from the Bhorgiri and Yelavali villages are at present being trained by forest officials to explore livelihood alternatives, while NGO Kalpvriksh is focusing on teaching them about sustainable ways to protect and conserve the environment. These two villages were selected for the initiative by the forest department under the Dr Shyamaprasad Mukherjee Jan Van Vikas Scheme, under which funds of Rs 25 lakh per year are allocated for five years.



Yelavali and Bhorgiri villagers are mapping the biodiversity of their area, as also learning techniques like sustainable honey harvesting (inset) to better conserve local flora and fauna, among other initiatives

Conservator of forest (wildlife) for Pune, Ravindra Wankhede, said, "The locals have created a micro-plan for conservation and development of their village under a government scheme. The aim is to reduce sustenance on forest produce like water, grass and firewood to generate income, and build capacity for the same in other ways."

Both **Yelavali and Bhorgiri** have a population of around 60-150 residents. They were selected in March (2017) for the scheme and three months were then spent on micro-planning the development of the resident communities.

Wankhede added that villagers are being trained to harvest bees, become tourist guides and identify other means of income to reduce economic dependence on forests. "The skills identified by the villagers include the jobs of tailor, plumber, electrician, stall feeder and milk production of cattle, besides labourers required to

conduct works like forest lines,” he said. The district collectorate, zilla parishad and other local governing bodies have also been involved to ensure that government schemes converge for the overall development of the villages. “Such measures will help reduce the burden on forest resources and fast destruction of biodiversity caused by human interference. It will help cause fewer disturbances of forest areas,” added Wankhede.

Meanwhile, **Kalpavriksh** is helping villagers learn sustainable ways to conserve. “They are working on mapping biodiversity in the area, like amphibians, reptiles, trees, birds and other unique aspects,” shared Pradeep Chavan, a member of the NGO working on biodiversity conservation. He added that better honey harvesting techniques are being taught to villagers, which includes not disturbing the queen bee and baby bees in hives. “Other steps also include avoiding spraying of pesticides on crops, which affects the honeybee population. Protecting and reviving the habitats of these important insects is being also taught,” he said, adding that protecting forest areas by curbing hunting and tree cutting is also being taken up by villagers. “Identifying and protecting forest-grown vegetables and native trees and their seeds is another task being adopted,” said Chavan, pointing out that such efforts are usually taken by non-natives like researchers, forest officials and nature lovers. However, it was decided here that it is best to build the capacity of locals and empower them for the task. “Workshops on forest rights, laws and wildlife protection laws are held regularly, especially with the involvement of women and youngsters, so that they can assert their rights and make the most of government schemes,” emphasised Chavan.

Elaborating on the effort, Yelavali villager Subhash Dolas told Mirror, “Villagers have come forward democratically to conserve the forest area. They decide entirely on the utilisation of funds.” He added that this money has for now been spent on **eco-tourism**, solar energy, LPG connections to reduce the use of forest wood and efficient waste management. First published by

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