

Maharashtra's Feast in The Forest

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Indian jungles are teeming with all kinds of fruits vegetables and seeds that make for some of the best meals

A few summers ago, I visited Vanvadi forest for the first time. I had just met the environmentalist Bharat Mansata, who asked me to help him photo-document the wild edible plants that grow there. A wise and endearing Thakur Adivasi tribal from these parts, Bua, accompanied us; he seemed to know every inch of the place. The vibe resonated on a barefoot walk through the jungle, and we soon began chalking out public awareness events on these 'forest foods' for the coming monsoon—we would take people on trails facilitated by Bua and his family, and have them experience the flavours of the forest .

At that time, I had not thought of it like that, but there was a quiet revolution in the air.

A Warli lady from Aarey presents a harvest of wild mushrooms

Vanvadi is something of a 'forest collective' on a 64-acre stretch of undulating land at the foothills of the Western Ghats in Maharashtra. The only human settlement there is a village-style community house with just two walls, where workshops and environment-related activities are often conducted. Life there is not just rustic, basic and off the grid—there is no electricity, mobile reception or piped water.

Over 20 years ago, Bharat and about two dozen like-minded people pooled their resources and purchased this land with a plan to create an ecologically sustainable community space and let nature regenerate the forest, which had been overexploited.

To many city slickers, Vanvadi might seem like a new-age digital detox, but to me it is more real. Its large-scale rainwater harvesting efforts, combined with the forest's dense roots that act as an underground sponge, have ensured efficient groundwater recharge. Even in peak summer, when wells in the nearby deforested villages go dry, Vanvadi's remain full and act as an important source for villagers. It is a similar story with firewood and wild foods—for the many villagers who have lost their forests, the jungle is becoming the only source to obtain the highly nutritious and delicious foods central to their tribal identity.

On our visit, though, the landscape looked too stark to produce anything edible. In these parts, the oppressively warm and dry spring-summer transition period hardly displays nature's abundance, unlike the monsoon, when the region metamorphoses into a vivid green paradise with lush vegetation almost magically appearing from nowhere.

Most trees had been reduced to bare skeletons of their usual selves, having let go of their foliage, which now carpeted the land. We were here, though, for the exceptions.

The mahua (or Indian butter tree), for instance, was fruiting at that time. While its sweet flowers are used to make jaggery and porridge, and fermented to make liquor, its fruit is highly nutritious. The seeds yield high-quality edible oil, and the residue after its extraction can be either used as manure or burnt as a mosquito repellent. Mahua trees are considered sacred by many tribes and never cut, but when one dies, its high-grade timber is used. Unfortunately for the tribals, the British began to tax and restrict the use of these trees during colonial times in a market where factory-made liquor resulted in huge tax revenues and mahua brew, a free beverage, posed too much competition. Indian governments continued with the same tradition, leading to many sacred mahua trees being cut all over the country.

Bua identifies a loth plant at Vanvadi forest

With the agility of a primate, Bua raced up and down a tembrun (tendu) tree to return with a bunch of fruits. Tembrun leaves are traditionally used to hand-roll beedis or Indian cigarillos, but the fruit was a delightful surprise—orange and fleshy, and tasting like apricot and mango ice cream.

Nearly every other bush on our trail was a fruit-bearing **karvanda** plant, and we snacked on these sweet, juicy berries throughout our walk. Hidden in the soil underneath many of those criss-crossing vines was an underground storehouse of edible tubers, several times healthier and tastier than market potatoes, and Bua dug some out with a pickaxe to show us how much free food existed here.

Meanwhile, from an ordinarily indistinguishable mesh of creepers, Bua's wife, Ambibai, harvested some shoots of gidhod creepers, which we later cooked for dinner on a wood-fired oven and ate along with kadu kandh. An otherwise unacceptably bitter tuber, kadu kandh needs to be stripped of all its bitterness by boiling in wood ash—something that Bua and Ambibai taught us. Many wild tubers and leaves are not really edible till they are treated using special techniques or combined with other wild leaves or fruits that remedy the undesirable or toxic properties, after which they transform into highly nourishing superfoods. There is a lot of science surrounding the food here.

A spread of wild food laid out for tasting at a forest food festival at Hideout

You do not even have to leave city limits to discover that our forest food biodiversity is not just alive, but also disappearing because of centralised control of forests that were once managed by tribal communities. Mumbai, for example, has one such natural forest within its expanse. A big part of this jungle is in Aarey, a green island that is not officially part of a reserved forest, but still home to some 10,000 Warlis—indigenous tribals who share their habitat with wild leopards (and worship them as gods), cook using firewood, and consume along with their farmed produce forest foods such as the soft-shell river crab

chimbori

(which I had tasted here last monsoon), leaves of the

loth

plant (the wild mother plant of the elephant foot yam or

suran

), all sorts of seasonal mushrooms, and products of the

mahua

tree.

When you step into Aarey from one of the main roads, it is a surreal shock how you transition from maximum city to parallel universe of tribal hamlets in a matter of minutes. But even here, illegal constructions and 'developmental' projects threaten to cut thousands of trees and ruin this unique urban jungle, and with it, the availability of forestland and wild foods for the Warli tribe.

Unsurprisingly, Bua's tribal wisdom has been a hit at the hugely popular Forest Food Foraging Walk events at Vanvadi. The format is simple, fun and effective: a bunch of city people foraging for food on a happy nature trail with Bua and his family. Our tribal friends identified and explained the use of each plant along the way. Then everyone cooked together and enjoyed a delicious meal with the wild veggies.

Wild cardamom flowers, a flavourful spring delicacy in the Northeast, is generally stewed with meat and vegetables

"It all begins with sensitisation to nature," Bharat explained. "City people are deprived of such experiences. Transitioning from city life to a forest soothes their senses. Having that sensory experience is the important first step towards wanting to protect nature. Once you build an emotional relationship, the intellectual parts automatically follow."

It also helps the cause that taste-wise, processed food simply cannot match wild foods, so tribal food festivals have been a natural outcome of the forest foods revival movement. A series of low-key festivals have been taking place in Maharashtra over the last four to five years at remote tribal areas such as Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary, while another smaller event happened last year at a Warli tribal village in Palghar district, attracting a number of day-tourists from Mumbai.

Then there are the bigger, more publicised food festivals. Living Farms' forest foods festival in Delhi and Wild Foods Festival at Kotagiri in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, for instance, attracted many visitors. Odisha, with its rich tribal heritage, is also becoming an epicentre of a tribal foods revival movement, with a series of wild food festivals at the Niyamgiri foothills, some of which have had on display 900 wild ingredients and 400 ready-to-eat dishes!

Last year, I attended a relatively low-key festival that BAIF Development Research Foundation, a Pune-based NGO, had organised at Hideout, a quaint little homestay and wellness centre at Vikramgad, a Warli tribal area. While it was both pleasurable and confusing to have tasted close to 40 recipes made with diverse wild ingredients in a single lunch, what made the trip all the more worthwhile was the opportunity to meet people like Sanjay Patil of BAIF and get a sense of the scale of the forest foods movement. He spoke about Konganpada, a tribal village that through consistent lobbying won back forest resource management rights from the government, which had been taken from them over a century ago. They have now planted some 30,000

mahua

saplings themselves and started processing a variety of its products—an effort to end malnutrition and generate income.

In Himalayan states like Arunachal Pradesh, where I have been involved in indigenous food documentation, forest cover is close to 80 per cent. Here, people feel the need for a wild foods movement because forest foods are a part of their lives and identity.

The Idu Mishmi, for example, an animist tribe from the Dibang Valley, have strict eco-spiritual taboos regarding biodiversity management that ensure constant and sustainable use of wild foods, including wild meat. Hunted meat, for example, can never be sold, and the spoils of every hunt must be shared with all in the village. Following a kill, the hunter goes through a kind of penance period, during which he is not allowed to eat certain foods or sleep with his wife. All this ensures that hunting happens only when required.

During Reh, their most important ritual-festival, a deliciously aromatic wild leaf called **ahona** is slow-cooked with rough cornmeal and served at the ritual, which, as a rule, cannot be performed without serving **ahona**. This is meant to be an expression of respect for habitats where such wild foods grow. It comes as no surprise that the Idu Mishmis are well nourished, have strong family bonds, and laugh easily. Famines are unheard of in these parts.

Wild Himalayan tubers come in great diversity

Wild food is obviously about more than just cuisine; it is an entire ecosystem of intermeshed areas that are diverse yet connected. It is about nutrition, but also other concepts such as sustainable development, herbal medicine, forest conservation, famine control, climate change, water resource management, tribal art, culture and music, nature worship, cultural identity, and a sense of community.

The forest foods movement is not about fighting the system. On the contrary, it's about opening our eyes to the existence of a larger 'system', of which we are already a part; it's about learning from both ancient knowledge and the underlying wisdom of the forest people—something that cannot be recorded in writing, but only experienced as a way of life.

All photographs by Sanjiv Valsan

The information

Getting There

The nearest airports are **Mumbai** (approx. 70km) and **Pune** (approx. 115 km). The nearest major railway station is **Karjat** (27km/45min); for those taking the Mumbai local, **Neral** (approx. 12km/15mins) is the nearest railhead.

Vanvadi

As a non-profit collective, all its collections go towards maintaining Vanvadi's conservation projects. The place is open to the public for

workshops

forest food walks

and their

Van Utsav

(Forest Festival) held every year in October during Dusshera. Accommodation and vegetarian food in a quaint

community house

are available during these events (at a modest fee), and participants are encouraged to spend a night in the forest. Visitors may also bring their own tents and

camp

underneath the stars. To know more, join their Facebook group,

facebook.com/groups/vanvadi

To register for their next forest foods **Foraging Walk** to be held on February 11, 2018, write to zuimansata@gmail.com or call +91- 22-23542420.