



FOREST FOODS AND ECOLOGY FESTIVAL

December 12-14, 2014
New Delhi, India

A mind-boggling 1200 varieties of uncultivated forest foods were displayed at the 'Forest Foods and Ecology Festival', Dec 12 to 14, 2014, in New Delhi. About 375 people participated, including representatives of 23 forest dependent communities from 13 states. Beginning with a day-long national conference on forest foods, the Festival hosted at Sri Aurobindo Society was jointly organized by Living Farms, Kalpavriksh, SADED, Vividhara, Gandhi Peace Foundation and others.



The Forest Foods Festival & Exhibition



Overview of the Festival

Here are some engaging glimpses of the Forest Foods and Ecology Festival, which showcased over 1200 varieties of uncultivated/forest foods – natural, safe, nutritious and free! – brought by adivasi and forest dependent communities from 13 states all over India. A mind-boggling diversity of edible leaves, twigs, flowers, seeds, fruits, berries, vegetables, roots and tubers, fungi (like mushrooms), resins, honey, fish, forest fowl, (and what not!) ... to celebrate India's rich and vibrant bio-cultural heritage of wild foods, yet consumed by the indigenous forest people of our oldest surviving civilizations.

Displayed alongside the forest foods were several tribal crafts – hand-crafted basketry, multifunctional containers of all shapes and sizes, mats, even musical instruments – all made out of forest bamboo, reed and grasses!

The exhibition area – in the peacefully convivial garden grove environs of Sri Aurobindo Society, ND – was beautifully designed, using natural materials – bamboo, jute, cotton fabrics and coconut coir ropes... a rustic, ethnic and 'forestry' feel... animated with a free people's energy, ... laughter, chatter, song and music wafting in the air. All in all, quite enchanting!



Discussion Meetings of Forest Communities

Three open discussion circles focused on: (1) traditional adivasi culture and ethos, (2) the nutritional value of forest foods, and (3) present challenges and struggles of native communities across the country. Deep concern was expressed about: their disappearing culture; the harmful effects of an alien education and consumerist-economic system on the youth; growing restrictions on free access to forests; the spread of mono-cultural commercial plantations and chemical agriculture promoted by government bodies and external commercial interests; the forced displacement and fragmentation of forest communities; the violence affecting their lives; and the ineffective or oppressive legal framework that should ideally protect their rights. Many such passionate, concerned voices rang out, pledging to defend their forest and their self-reliant, ecologically sustainable culture.

Video footages from the festival are available for viewing here

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKjqp8Kpif-ortkxlxji-rg>

They may also be viewed by looking up
YouTube Channel - 'Forest Foods Festival'



Poster Presentations at the Festival

Shalini Bhutani, Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) Lawyer, presented a poster explaining where and how wild forest foods and their conservation fit into our present legal and administrative framework, which largely ignores them, or looks down upon them. The Government's food, agriculture and forest policies and programmes abjectly fail to recognize the vital importance of uncultivated foods in the lives of the forest dependent communities.

Several colourful nutrition charts showed how forest foods provide a well-balanced diet with a healthy mix of energy-rich food, protein-rich food and protective food for different seasons. Viewers learnt about wild foods rich in iron, calcium and folic acid – to keep anemia at bay – and other uncultivated foods high in Vitamin A, Beta-Carotene and Vitamin C – to ward off other illnesses. Many forest foods are also very rich in much needed anti-oxidants; also fibre.



Fruits

A mind-boggling array of wild uncultivated forest fruits displayed at the Festival. Wild berries, fruits, edible flowers - eaten straight off the plant/ tree, or consumed in a variety of ways - dried, juiced, fermented, preserved.



Indigenous Grains, Legumes, Oilseeds

Many forest dependent communities traditionally grow a number of native food crops – commonly 40-50 varieties – in or near forests. These include various grains, millets, legumes, oilseeds, vegetables, etc. that provide the people a wholesome, balanced, toxin-free diet. No chemicals, external inputs or groundwater are used.

More photographs are on pages 17-20

The Bountiful Gifts of Mother Forest

A Tale of Forest Foods, Cultures, Communities and Ecology

Introduction

From the womb of Aranya, Mother Forest, was born the most amazingly rich diversity of life forms – suffused with vibrance soaked from the sun! Bounteous Aranya provided all that was needed for their sustenance.

In this forest cradle, grew the ancient civilizations of the Adivasis, the original human inhabitants of the land. Their communities lived in harmony with Nature as close-knit kutumbas, or families. The forest, revered as ‘Mother’, is still integral to the very identity of these indigenous peoples, inseparably linked with an umbilical cord – a deep biological, emotional, cultural and spiritual relationship, based on caring and sharing.

For many millennia, until agriculture began – barely 10,000 years ago – the forests met every need. Agriculture too was nourished by the generous gifts of the forest.

We tragically forget that the forests regenerate our life-sustaining environment, essential for the well-being of all on earth. They efficiently harvest the sun’s energy, sequester carbon, produce biomass, create fertile topsoil and guard against its erosion. They moderate the climate, mitigate global warming, provide oxygen, bring rain, recharge groundwater, replenish and cleanse our rivers and water bodies, buffer against floods, and provide habitats for rich biodiversity. They also provide the forest dwelling people many wholesome foods and a huge variety of other useful produce – all decentralized and well-distributed gifts of Mother Nature. The parasitical modern industrial economy cannot provide these essential needs, even at enormous cost.



In February, 2014, a unique ‘Tribal Foods Festival’ was held near Bissam Cuttack – in the Niyamgiri foothills of south-western Odisha – with the support of Living Farms, a non-governmental organization working with Adivasi and other forest dependent communities to further strengthen the local food systems and conserve the ecology of the area. Over 600 adivasis, about 80% women, gathered from almost 200 tribal villages of different states in eastern and central India – to celebrate the rich diversity of their traditional foods. More than 1500 food varieties – cultivated and uncultivated, raw and cooked – were on display. Over 900 of these were uncultivated forest foods, including 400 ready-to-eat recipes for sampling.

The following day, the festivity and celebration settled into a more solemn reflective mood. A hundred or so representatives, who had stayed back, deliberated the many

challenges and assaults, internal and external, that their adivasi kutumb faced. But the resolve to protect their Mother Forest was unshakeable. This was not the first time they had met; nor the last.



Nine months later, from December 12 to 14, a 'Forest Foods and Ecology Festival' was held at Sri Aurobindo Society, New Delhi. It saw the participation of more than 375 people, representing 23 forest dependent communities gathered from 13 states of India. They brought with them for display over 1200 varieties of forest foods and/or related photo documentation. Organised collaboratively by Living Farms, Kalpavriksh, SADED, Vividhara, Gandhi Peace Foundation and others, the event began with a whole day national conference on Forest Foods. This spilled over on the 12th evening into the green open spaces outside the auditorium - the festive Exhibition arena - and continued over the next two days.

The national conference, targeting policy makers, opinion makers and general citizens, aimed to highlight the importance of uncultivated forest foods - and the ethos and worldviews linked to these - for a large population of this land. Stressing the urgent need to protect the ecological and bio-cultural habitats of forest foods as part of our food and agriculture policy, it offered a convivial space for dialogue between the representatives of the community, academicians, public health scientists. and those of the government. It thus hoped to initiate a policy discourse around food and nutrition security, and the sovereignty of Adivasi and other forest dwelling/dependent communities.

The secretary of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs attended the national conference, while Smt Maneka Gandhi, Minister of Women and Child Welfare, inaugurated the 'Forest Foods and Ecology Festival', and interacted with the participants at the numerous stalls with their fascinating displays.

❧ DAY 1 ❧

The inaugural of the conference was marked by the release of the book, 'Forests as Food Producing Habitats' written by Dr. Debal Deb, Ms. Kavitha Kuruganti, Dr. V Rukmini Rao, and Ms. Salome Yesudas, and published by Living Farms.

Speaking on 'Food Security', Dr Deb, well-known ecologist and scholar, highlighted the conspicuous absence of uncultivated food in the National Food Policy. Emphasizing the role and importance of uncultivated food, he exhorted us to remember our not so distant past, when as hunter gatherers, before the advent of cultivation, we depended on the forest and wilderness for sourcing our food. Such uncultivated foods have again become very important for our food security.

Dr Deb pointed out that there was no quantitative study till date revealing how

much of the food consumed by forest communities was uncultivated. The present investigation was a concerted effort to fill this yawning gap. He highlighted some salient aspects and findings from their study, with 34% household sampling, in 6 villages of 2 tribal districts of Odisha, Rayagada and Sundargarh.

It was found that in bio-diverse forest regions, no one goes hungry. Between July and December 2103, the quantification study period, there were a total of 121 varieties of wild foods harvested by the local households, averaging by weight 4.56 kg per collection foray. These constitute between 12% and 24.5% of the total food consumption. However, if one considers too the foods like fruit and berries that are consumed raw in the forest itself, the percentage of uncultivated food consumption would be significantly higher. Several forest foods like mushroom, tubers, honey, also provide cash income through sale.

The second presentation by Ms. Salome Yesudas, a nutritionist, looked at forest foods as an abundant source of nourishment that can help provide nutritional security. Listing the many merits of uncultivated forest foods, she said that they were: (i) available round the year, even in peak summer or early rains, when the stock of cultivated crops of the previous season is exhausted; (ii) easily and equitably accessible to forest dwellers; (iii) varied, enabling balanced nutrition, (iv) free or low-cost, (v) safe (free from natural or human contamination/adulteration), and (vi) packed with micro nutrients, besides being rich in much needed antioxidants and dietary fibre, particularly good for diabetic people. (vii) Such uncultivated foods were also a vital safety net against the increasing trend of crop failures caused by climate change, erratic rainfall, and mounting ecological degradation, including groundwater scarcity, dead/depleted soils, and decimated biodiversity.

Speaking on the legal and policy aspects related to forests and forest communities, Shalini Bhutani pointed out that the traditional knowledge of forests and forest foods was vastly older than the Indian Constitution itself. The Government of India lists most of these forest dwelling/dependent communities as 'tribes', using the word as an essentially administrative term. In the policies and plans of the government, these indigenous people are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) seen as uncultivated, and hence, backward. There is little or no recognition of their ecologically symbiotic (and knowledge rich) ancient civilization, culture and way of living that alone can protect and regenerate our forests.

Under the Government of India order of 1950, said Ms. Bhutani, there are 705 Scheduled Tribes that are notified. "So there are 102.2 million people recognized as dependent on the forest."

"Today, we need to have a fresh look at forests in an alternative way, and to recognize their immense value, apart from the timber and wood they contain. We also need to challenge the kind of institutional and administrative structure and policies for centralizing the control of forests and forest resources for commercial extraction,

without any thought for social justice or ecological sustainability.”

Ms. Bhutani added that today, the administrative structure assigns food and food security to one ministry, and the management of forests to another. There needs to be greater coordination and synergy between them when looking at the overlapping area of uncultivated forest foods as a vital aspect of food security and sovereignty. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, supports the protection of forest foods. The Union Ministry of Women and Child Welfare too must look at the well-being of over 100 million people who depend on such uncultivated foods.

Dr. Amita Baviskar spoke of her experiences while working in the Narmada region. She said that the reason people have fought with such intensity, despite their vulnerabilities, is because they relate so closely to their land. Their lives revolve around Narmada - the hills and the jungles of Narmada. It is not just about their survival but also about their identity. But now, in Narmada, the jungles have come down. With a new food dependence on Government Ration shops, and easy accessibility of wheat, rice and packaged food, people have been forced to move away from their own diverse traditional foods. There is, said Dr Baveskar, an urgent need to re-popularize our rich old culture of food, especially amongst the youth, before it is completely lost. This would impel farmers to again grow their unique traditional varieties of crops. (If the traditional seeds are lost, the old culture of food dies.)

However, in the case of uncultivated foods, concerns were raised that if these are popularized, they might be “captured” by the corporate for external commercial exploitation, thus becoming unavailable to the adivasis.

Sharings by the Community people

Jagannath Majhi, a Kondh Adivasi said, “I was introduced to the jungle by my parents since I was a child. The way we understand and relate to the forest, none else could. She is a second mother for us. We call her mother not just because she gives us food, but because every aspect of our life is linked with the forests. A mother protects her children; and this is how we feel - safe in our forests. These define our very identity, and are inseparable from us!”

Arkhit Sawa related, “Seeing Delhi for the first time, the rush of cars makes us nauseous. The food too is very different. We are used to our mountain foods, and eat many kinds of uncultivated food found in our forests. These satiate us and give us health. We have a relationship with every tree in our forest, and they provide us generously. The Mahua tree, for example, has many uses. Its leaves provide fodder. The flowers are used to make jaggery, liquor or porridge. The fruits can be cooked and consumed as a vegetable. The seed is crushed to yield a cooking-oil, and the residual cake after extracting the oil is a valuable manure for farm crops.

When the Mahua tree dies, its wood is used for making bullock carts, musical instruments, agricultural implements, and for building our houses.

“... We are very concerned about our forests, and will fight if someone comes to harm her. We will even give our lives to protect our Mother Forest,” declared Sawa.

A woman from Nagaland: “We have rich bio-diversity. Uncultivated forest food is closely linked to our livelihood, culture and identity. It forms a major part of our diet. Several uncultivated forest herbs have medicinal values.”

The day-long national conference concluded with the screening of the film, ‘Candles in the Wind’, by Nandan Saxena and Kavitha Behl. This movie is about farmers’ suicide in Punjab which presented the plight of the widows of these small farmers, who are left to bear their debt and the responsibility of the family as well as the chemically abused-fields. The movie portrayed the struggle for survival of these brave farm widows. An abridged version (10 minutes) of ‘I cannot give you my Forest’, another movie by the same filmmakers on the forest foods and cultures of the native peoples of the Niyamgiri region of Odisha, was also screened in between the presentations during the day.

☞ DAY 2 ☞

The second day featured several parallel discussions led by the community representatives, all the participants sitting at the same level in a circle on the ground. Everyone who wanted to speak got a chance. The 3 main themes (discussed in separate circles) were: (1) the traditional ethos and culture of forest dependent communities; (2) the contemporary challenges faced by forest communities, and (3) the nutritional value of forest foods. The sharing in these discussions was multi-lingual, with Hindi serving as a common bridge language.

The following is a sampling of the different voices heard:

“In India, jungles are seen as sacred places, like Nature’s own Gurukuls, suitable for meditation and spiritual pursuits. We cannot allow them to be desecrated and destroyed now in the worship of the new money god!”

“While they blame adivasis, it is the government and big industries that are cutting down the forests in the name of development. Such destruction started under British rule with the initiation of the Railway project. We adivasis rely on forests only for our daily sustenance, not for hoarding or profiteering. We know that our children too will need the forest, and therefore take care to use it judiciously and sustainably. It is the outsiders, commercial dealers, in connivance with the forest department staff, who come in big trucks to carry away huge amounts of wood.”

“There is a need to change the perspective of urban people about the tribals. The

Forest Foods Festival is a positive step in this direction.”

“The knowledge that adivasis possess about their jungles and nature, is profound. The botanists used this knowledge, which they took from the adivasis, without giving them due acknowledgement and credit.”

Maina and Ambibai from Vanvadi in the Sahyadri foothills of Maharashtra, related: “We used to get lots of vegetables from the jungles around our area. The forest foods provided us health and strength. But city developers have totally wiped out the jungles surrounding Vanvadi and Chinchwadi. They not only cut the trees, but dug them out by the roots, loosening the soil and flattening the hilly lands with their JCBs. Huge quantities of eroded soil now run off each monsoon to silt up our streams and reservoirs. You all, who love the earth, we need to struggle, resist and stop this madness. It is only in unity that we will have the strength to win.”

A young adivasi woman from Raygada District of Odisha expressed, “As a mother, I worry about my kids because outside people are coming and destroying the forest. Now the women in our area are working together to resist this destruction. We are also replanting trees where they have been cut down.”

The issue of animals like elephants venturing into the areas of these community people was another matter of concern. “Because their habitats in surrounding areas have been destroyed, they have now started coming in large herds in our area, and have become a serious menace.”

Savita, from the coastal belt of Uttar Kannada, related that the adivasi communities in her area are beginning to lose their traditional knowledge. For example, they used to make lovely mats from local grasses. But now, many of them are buying plastic mats that are easily available and cheap. The traditional mats they made required a lot of effort. The younger generation too is not interested in the traditional crafts, especially those that face a struggling market in competition with cheap machine-made products.

Vishala from Bangalore said, “The traditional knowledge of using local medicinal plants is also getting lost as more people now depend upon allopathic doctors and factory produced medicines coming from outside.”

“The self reliance of the adivasis is getting lost. They offered a worship and prayer before a community hunting expedition. All customary rituals, social and religious, were performed by the adivasis themselves. But now, they call priests for such occasions.”

“The sarkari Public Distribution System (PDS) is providing low quality cheap rice, lacking in nutrition. Our forest foods and traditional varieties of grains, like millets, high in nutritional value, are thus getting substituted by the inferior PDS grains.”

List of Participants & their Stalls

1. Jangal Adhyan Kendra, Dindori, Madhya Pradesh
2. SPWD Society, Gujarat
3. Farm 2 Food Foundation, Assam
4. Vanvadi (Western Ghats Sahyadri foothills), Maharashtra
5. Barefoot College, SWRC, Tilonia, Rajasthan
6. Vividhara, Uttarakhand
7. Beej Bachao Aandolan, Uttarakhand
8. Abhivyakti Foundation, Jharkhand
9. PRAVAH, Jharkhand
10. Pragati, Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh
11. DULAL, Mayurbhanj, Odisha
12. ORRISSA, Malkangiri, Odisha
13. Swala, Jharkhand
14. North East Network (NEN), Nagaland
15. Institute for Women's Development, Odisha
16. FES (Foundation for Ecological Security), Odisha
17. Epiphany Society, Meghalaya
18. Living Farms, Odisha
19. BuDa Folklore, Uttar Kannada
20. Lokvigyan Kendra and Himdhara, Himachal Pradesh
21. SACAL, Ganjam, Odisha
22. KIRDTI, Keonjhar, Odisha

Concluding Session (Day 3)

This featured a discussion on the draft declaration/appeal of the Festival, which was finalized as presented below:

Forest Foods and Ecology

An appeal for empathy and wise governance – to protect our natural heritage, culture, and collective future

We, from numerous Adivasi and forest-dependent communities in India, along with people from different streams of society, gathered at the “Forest Foods & Ecology” Festival, December 12 to 14, 2014 at Sri Aurobindo Society, New Delhi. About 1200 varieties of forest/uncultivated foods from various parts of the country were displayed, sharing our rich heritage of Nature’s gifts.

The forests run deep in our life-blood; and we feel anguish seeing the grave threats they face. As an outcome of our joint discussions, we – forest-dependent communities, supported by others – declare:

1. The natural forests are a nurturing mother to us. Our very identities, cultures and world-views are closely linked to the forests that provide our primary needs.
2. Our forests and other common lands bless us with many invaluable gifts – abundant, diverse, nutritious foods, medicinal plants, and numerous other useful products – vital to our daily life and livelihoods for generations beyond count, particularly in times of scarcity, like droughts.
3. Our rich traditional knowledge and understanding of our bio-diverse forests, evolved over millennia, is passed on from generation to generation, along with a spirit of respect and gratitude. Our cultures discourage greed, the root of scarcity, harm and sorrow.
4. The natural forests regenerate our life-sustaining environment, essential for the well-being of all on earth. They harvest the sun’s energy, produce biomass, create fertile topsoil and guard against its erosion. They moderate the climate, mitigate global warming, provide oxygen, bring rain, recharge groundwater, buffer against floods, and provide habitats for rich biodiversity.
5. Any attempt to cut down the forests, threatens grave environmental damage. It also violates our fundamental right to life and livelihood. We pledge to do our utmost to safeguard our forests and the rich life it harbours – for the well-being and joy of all!

6. The sarkari laws and their implementation - to safeguard our community forest rights, life cultures and livelihoods - need further strengthening, not weakening, so that Mother Forest continues to remain healthy to nurture us and future generations.

7. We cannot understand how anyone can claim to possess any kind of proprietary right, including 'Intellectual Property Right' (IPR), over any part of our ancient wealth or traditional knowledge, violating our ethos and our age-old collective rights. This is neither reasonable nor acceptable.

8. Today's education system ignores our cultures and local natural resources, alienating the young from our former healthy and ecologically-sustainable lifestyles. This needs to change urgently.

9. Our traditional wholesome foods are part of our culture. The government food schemes should respect this, and not pollute our young with inferior, alien foods and tastes.

10. Our forests and traditional commons, our peoples and our cultures, are all under grave threat from misconceived "development" projects, grabbing by outsiders, and by modern agricultural methods and mono-cultural plantations. These do grave harm, and must stop now. We further call for an immediate end to our displacement and dispossession by such short-sighted, destructive projects that devastate our life-culture and threaten our very survival.

11. We seek a rethinking of money-centric 'development policies', and urge a holistic approach that respects our cultures and sustainable lifestyles; and which enables us to live and thrive on our ancestral lands, safeguarding the country's rich ecological and cultural heritage.

12. We declare that we will do our very best to keep alive our rich heritage resources and traditions. Welcoming a new era, we urge the support of all - to safeguard and regenerate the health of our Mother Earth and forests. Our warm greetings and heartfelt wishes are extended to all; and we humbly ask you to support us!

This declaration is collectively endorsed by numerous representatives of adivasi and forest-dependent communities, supported by other civil society representatives, public health experts, nutrition scientists, ecologists, educators, sociologists, senior State functionaries and concerned citizens.



Greens & Vegetables

A glimpse of the enormously rich diversity of uncultivated leafy greens and vegetables found in the forest. Some are consumed raw, others are cooked. Many offer multiple nutritional and medicinal benefits. The maximum availability of these wild greens is usually in late summer or early monsoon, when cultivated greens are relatively rare.



Tubers & Mushrooms

Edible treasures from the forest floor or under it! A hitherto unknown world for most city folk. The sheer diversity here is amazing. Commonly termed 'Kanda' or 'Kand mool' (generic name for a tuber) - some are perennial, some seasonal, some eaten raw, some cooked. Some are fruity, crunchy, sweet and starchy; some are bitter. Some need careful processing and detoxifying - commonly in a running stream for many hours or a few days, and/ or boiled with wood ash - before they may be consumed. Many of these tubers also serve as drought/famine insurance foods - always available even when nothing else is. A good source of nutrition, and some of high medicinal value too.

Also seen here are several varieties of mushrooms, wild edible ones that pop up on the forest floor when the first rains hit the ground. Different shapes, sizes, colors and tastes. Many are dried and stored for later use.



A Baiga man from baiga-chak. Wearing a unique hat made of bamboo with layers of Vauhinia Vahlia/ Maalu/ Siali leaves sandwiched in between. This is rain-proof headgear!



Bhil Adivasis from M.P.



Adivasi woman from Machiyam village in Malkangiri, Rayagada, Odisha.



An Adivasi group from Machiyam and surrounding areas, in Odisha.

Adivasi Voices



As a mother, I worry about my kids. I worry about the future generations. Because people are coming and destroying forest. Now in our area, women are working and resisting this destruction. We are growing trees and plants again where they have been brought down. We started to grow again plants such as kanda, sattu, etc.

In this area, people who trade in wood came and bombed the place, to scare the adivasis and take the wood. The local adivasi people resisted this attack on their forest. Since the last 4 years they have regenerated the forest.



Adivasis have lived for 1000s of years. We are not dependent on agriculture because we have our forests. Our forests- our mother will take care of us. It is being said that Adivasis are destroying the forests. But adivasis only rely on forest for sustenance, in restricted way for making huts, etc. People from outside, on the other hand, come in trucks and take huge amounts of wood.



Living Farms gratefully acknowledges the following organizations and individuals for their contribution towards making this festival a grand success

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