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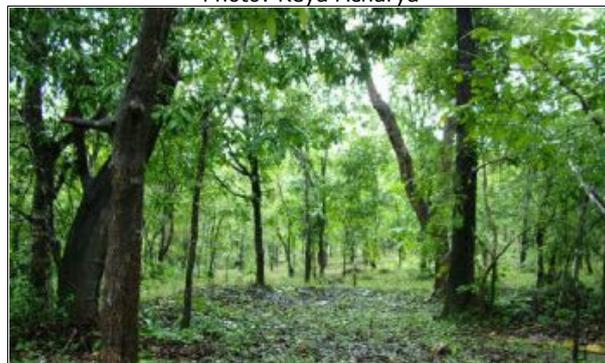


A walk in the woods

KEYA ACHARYA

Appiko, a grassroots conservation programme modelled on the Chipko movement, has made possible the regeneration of hundreds of acres of forests in northern Karnataka.

Photo: Keya Acharya



New lease of life: Regenerated forest at Belekal.

Lean and sprightly with a penetrating eye, 63-year-old areca (supari) farmer and retired university professor Mahabaleshwar Narayana Hegde, affectionately known as "MNH", leads the way through young forest trees and newly-sprung grasses in the Belekal Reserve Forest range at Gubbigadde, about 16 km from Sirsi in Karnataka's Uttar Kannada district. A loud whooping bird-call rings through the trees; MNH whoops back in reply, and grins at my questioning face.

"Someone out there in the forests is wanting to know if he has company", explains MNH. "This is our system of communication in the forests."

Growing free

Belekal's forests, though muggy and steamy, resemble deep woods instead of the dense overgrowth of the jungles of tropical rainforests. The reason is soon clear.

"All this that you see," says MNH with a wide sweep of his arms, "has been left to regenerate these last 30 years, since 'Appiko' began." The Appiko ("to embrace") movement, started on September 8, 1983 by fiery activist Pandurang Hegde who was inspired by Sunderlal Bahugana's Chipko movement in U.P., used the same method of villagers hugging the trees to save them from being felled by the State, which had no laws then against felling of timber inside protected areas. Appiko saved thousands of trees in the Sirsi belt and through protective action from 1983 to 1990 in various Western Ghat forests from Kodagu to Uttar Kannada districts saved trees from being felled and was responsible for the setting up of laws prohibiting timber felling in reserve forests in Karnataka.

Local initiative

The forests that MNH now shows had, by the time Appiko began, mostly been felled by the department. Surrounded by rampant felling on all sides, the 10-odd families of the Gubbigadde group of hamlets (which in turn form part of

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Koppa village with 150 families and 1,200 population), led by MNH, joined Pandurang's Appiko movement in a bid to conserve the trees. Grazing inside these lands was strictly prohibited and all cattle had to be stall-fed, monitoring against forest fires was taken up and the villages steadily converted to biogas using cattle dung in lieu of forest fuel wood for their home needs. Roughly 500 acres of reserve forests in the Gubbigadde area surrounding the villages were left to regenerate naturally since 1983. Today, 24 years later, Appiko has turned into a grassroots conservation system. Around Gubbigadde today, the trees, all hardwood indigenous about 10 feet apart and mainly of the terminalia variety, are about 15 feet in height, with glossy green leaves. Natural regeneration has allowed smaller plants to take root from the seed dispersal of bigger trees. Once a year before the monsoon, people from the village community take it in turns to go around the forests snapping off the extra branches of these saplings and leaving the main one. "Otherwise these will remain shrubs instead of growing into trees," explains MNH.

On the other side of these forest, overlooking a deep stream, are deep, dark and dense trees, part of the same Belekal range. "Those trees are the 'founders' of the Appiko movement", says MNH pointing across the stream. These form part of another 200 acres of the same range that were prevented from being felled in 1983.

Initial hostility

At first, says MNH, forest officials were both hostile and threatening against villagers taking steps for forest conservation. But once Appiko showed results, the first to become aware and sensitised, amazingly and ironically, was the forest department. "Now, at least they treat us well," says MNH.

Conservation awareness amongst areca farmers in Sirsi has now spread to their *soppinabetta* lands, a unique system wherein nine acres of forest land for every acre of areca, have been given to landholders by the British. The *betta* land belongs to the forest department and cannot be alienated but the areca landholder can build his own house on it, using the leaves from the trees as mulching, necessary for the areca. The British weren't interested in the areca, but in the pepper vines that grew on the areca-trunks.

Areca plantations in this region are thus an interlinked mix of reserve forests, *betta* lands, paddy fields, areca plantations simultaneously growing pepper, vanilla and cardamom, and home gardens called *kai thota* adjoining each house. Each home has stall-fed cattle and a dung-biogas unit for cooking gas and lives largely on the products from each land-use system. "The system is the same in all families," says MNH.

Rich rewards

"A study by us has shown that the richness of Sirsi's biodiversity comes from the interlinking mix of all these land-use systems," says Mahabaleshwar Rajaram Hegde from Prakruthi, an NGO founded by Pandurang Hegde dealing with sustainable harvesting of non-timber forest produce.

Betta lands continue to this day, largely unencroached but suffering degradation due to the lopping off of tree crowns and branches for mulching that has stunted further and steadily killed them. Prakruthi has been advocating keeping at least one-third of tree-crown intact for sustained growth. "Some listen", says M.R. Hegde.

But natural regeneration has worked well with nearly 500 acres of beautifully renewed *betta* lands in the Koppa region alone. With the next generation from this Havik community of farmers leaving for the cities, Sirsi's farms now face a continuity crisis.

"Probably good for the forests," jokes MNH as he wraps a *supari* nut in a betel leaf and pops it in his mouth. "I only have five of these a day", he says defensively.

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