

# **Strengthening Conservation through Adivasis' Traditional Practices and the Forest Rights Act**

## **A Social Assessment prepared by Action for Community Organization, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD), April 2013**

### **Indigenous Communities in Gudalur Valley**

The Gudalur valley is home to four different indigenous communities, all of who fall in the category of “Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs)”-Paniyas, Kattunayakans, Bettakurumbas and Mullukurumbas. Each of these communities is unique in terms of its social structure, economic organization, cultural and religious practices and extent and nature of dependence on forests.

- 1) **Paniyas**-The Paniyas constitute the highest population of indigenous communities in Gudalur valley. The Paniyas have been bonded labourers for several generations on land owned by a non tribal forest dwelling community called the Chetties. Traditionally food gatherers, most of them work as wage labourers to earn an income.
- 2) **Kattunayakans**-The Kattunayakans were mainly hunters and gatherers of forest produce, especially honey with sporadic shifting cultivation around their settlements. They have been relatively furthest away from mainstream development interventions. A majority continue to live inside the forest, living on forest produce and a small amount of money which they earn by going for wage labour occasionally.
- 3) **Mullukurumbas**-The Mullukurumbas are known for their hunting and bird catching traditions. Among the indigenous communities, they are the most well off, often owning small tracts of land and practising settled agriculture. Over the years they have had the greatest access to government schemes and programmes. Today several Mullukurumbas are enrolled in higher study courses in Coimbatore and Bangalore. Some also have government jobs.
- 4) **Bettakurumbas**-The Bettakurumbas are famous for their skills as elephant mahouts. They have often been employed by the forests department as their foot soldiers (Anti Poaching Watchers), since they know the ins and outs of the forest thoroughly. They were known to lead the khedda operations for erstwhile maharajas. Many were skilled ironmongers. Currently many are employed by the forest department in various capacities.

### **Project Impacts**

The project was designed and developed only after the need for the revival of traditional practices in conservation was articulated by the communities. The project design has been shared with the community representatives and the potential project impacts were discussed, which are being listed below:

- The project will ensure increased awareness among the communities about their rights as well as responsibilities towards conservation. The focus of the project is not only assertion of rights but also promotion of better understanding of duties that communities have towards biodiversity conservation. Once such understanding is established, foundation for effective CFR (Community Forest Rights) governance models in the Gudalur valley can be laid.
- Trainings on CFR provisions will equip communities with materials and information to

assert their rights. In the long run, communities will be empowered to negotiate with stakeholders like Forest Department, Revenue Department and Tribal Welfare Department for establishment of rights and management of community resource use areas.

- A detailed study of the sacred groves with active involvement of the community will result in better understanding of the cultural and biodiversity values of the sacred groves. Formal recognition of the sacred groves, as envisaged in the project, will provide a check on further encroachment of these forest patches.
- Effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act will enable greater role for communities to play in forest management related decision making. Since communities have historically been managing forests through their traditional governance mechanisms which are weakening, the project will provide an excellent platform for communities to reflect on this historic role and establish ways to revive their traditional governance systems.
- As proposed in the project, adivasi youth will work with elders from their community to understand and map sacred groves and resource use areas. This is expected to encourage transmission of traditional knowledge across generations.

No negative impact on communities is envisaged under the project.

### **Community Consultation during Project Design**

The implementation of community forest rights under Forest Rights Act (FRA) will be carried out with all the four indigenous communities in the Gudalur valley. Community consultations in the last few years have expressed the need for documenting traditional governance systems of communities which are fast disappearing. Trainings on FRA provisions helped communities to understand the scope of the Act in terms of making forest management related decisions. The idea to design a project which would support communities to become custodians of their forest resources was conceived by them. The Amendment in the rules of the Act was discussed at all team meeting of community representatives in ACCORD's office in Gudalur. It was decided that the amendment provides greater clarity for claiming access to traditionally used forest resources and managing them. The suggestion that emerged from the meeting was to design the project in a manner that will incorporate the relevant amended rules.

The cultural and biodiversity assessment of sacred groves will be carried out with the Paniyas and Kattunayakans only. Consultations with traditional elders from both the communities were separately carried out at area offices of Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) in 2011. The communities voiced their concern about the rampant encroachment of sacred groves and the consequent breakdown in their cultural values. Following the discussion, preliminary assessment of a few sacred groves was taken up the same year. The elders from the communities actively participated in the assessment "surveys". On sharing the findings from the above, the need to document all the sacred groves in Gudalur and understand their social and ecological status was felt.

The project was developed following these consultations and the final design has been shared with communities.

### **Monitoring Process**

Community mobilizers from the 8 area offices will be responsible for monitoring project implementation. Community mobilizers will be required to keep records of their project related visits to villages, meetings, trainings, etc. Monitoring exercises will be carried out every six months in the Gram Sabha meetings. Further the status of project will be presented and discussed at various community meetings of AMS as well as the periodic review meetings of ACCORD and feedback from these meetings will contribute to the improvement of the implementation of the project.

## **Grievance Redressal Mechanism**

Indigenous communities can raise a grievance arising from project activities at all times at the following community and organizational fora:

### **Community fora:**

- 1) Sangam meetings which are held every month. Every area center has several sangams which are composed of one or more villages and have village level meetings where the whole village (s) gets together. Each sangam has a leader elected by the village.
- 2) Sangam leaders meetings which are held every month. These meetings are held at the area centers. 5 taluk leaders from among the sangam leaders in each area are elected by the communities in the area.
- 3) Taluk leaders meeting which are held every month.

In addition to these, the following fora are also available for communities to raise their grievances if any:

- 4) Forest Rights Committee (FRC) meetings which are held once every 3 months.
- 5) Gram Sabha meetings which are held once every six months.

### **Organizational fora:**

- 1) Area team meeting-Community representatives in each area meet at their respective offices once in 2 weeks.
- 2) The area teams of all the 8 areas who act as community representative meet once every month at ACCORD's office in Gudalur.

On receipt of complaint from the affected individual(s) at any of the above fora, the concerned fora will respond to grievances in writing within 15 working days of receipt. A copy of the grievance will be provided to the CEPF Secretariat. The grievance redressal mechanism will be communicated to all concerned through village meetings. A grievance redressal poster has been designed which will be put up in the local languages in all the places where the Gram Sabha meets.