

The beginning -----

The loss of natural forests can impose high social costs on poor people--has proved true in the case of the people of Gadiaguma -a remote tribal village in Gollur Panchayat of Koraput district. The non timber forest products are no doubt vital for poverty avoidance and mitigation by having a strong role in fulfilling the basic needs, in providing seasonal gap filler income, and in serving as a safety net. This realization came to the people of the village once the lush green forests became a thing of past.

Out of the 50 families (all belonging to Paraja tribe) only 4 have patta land. The rest cultivate along the hill slopes without any legitimate land holding rights. Poverty and hunger drives them to cross the borders of the state for a few bucks to keep their body and soul together.

But time has taken a positive change. Ten years ago Pragati, a local NGO started intervention in Gollur Gram Panchayat. A few sensitive villagers were inspired to take initiatives for forest protection and formed a committee with 5 men and 5 women taking a leadership role. Since then it has become a practice of the villagers. They have engaged a person for watch and ward with contribution of food from each household as remuneration. Now in Antri Dangar and Gadiaguda (names of village forests) there are different trees like Amla, Harida, Char, Goli seeds, Karanja etc. and also edible roots and tubers are collected by people in different seasons .

In 1981-82 the soil conservation department has planted cashew in the village forests. The villagers have also planted cashew seeds in the lower part of the danger on their

own. The community has since then protected these plantations. But as the fruiting started the govt. leased out to outsiders. It was the time when Pragati started sensitizing the community to claim their usufruct patta rights. The block level federation of forest protecting communities i.e. Anchalik Jungle Surakshya Parishad organised a rally and met the District Collector in 2001 to demand for usufruct patta rights over cashew and coffee plantations. Thus in some areas the villagers were handed over with usufruct patta rights—out of which Gadiaguma was one. 35 Households were given patta over 70 acres of plantations. But there is another plantation which was leased out every year. In 2001 a lawyer Mr. Anand Kirsani, a local lawyer took lease of the plantations. But the villagers after their previous success were now very much excited. They drove out the man by force. The lawyer has filed a case which is still subjudice. The villagers are now harvesting cashew and distributing the same among themselves in village meeting.

“We don't need any compassion and charity. Pragati has showed us the way to claim a right and humane existence. We have learnt to challenge the institutional and political structures that perpetuate inequities.” Say the villagers.