

Of Food, Culture and Identity



A report of Indigenous Day
celebrated as a part of
Save the Western Ghats Meet
Practitioners' Conclave
1st Dec. 2012



**INDIGENOUS
PARTNERSHIP**
FOR AGROBIODIVERSITY
AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM
PARTNERSHIP FUND



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Pratyasha Rath



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TO BEGIN WITH....

The Western Ghats of India, which have been recently accorded the status of World Heritage Site by UNESCO, is one the recognized global biodiversity hotspot. This heritage site continues to capture the imagination of the world with its endemic flora and fauna and pristine scenic beauty. It has recently been in the news for not only the rabid mining and deforestation activities degrading its landscapes but also for the controversial Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel report, being made public last year by the government of India. This panel of experts appointed by the ministry of Forests and Environment, recommended to declare the entire Western Ghats as Ecologically Sensitive and has strongly spoken against the debilitating development projects in the region. Though the report has not been accepted or rejected by the government yet, still the report marks a milestone in the journey towards saving the Western Ghats which started decades ago. This is a crucial time for dialogue, deliberations and fostering new collaborations, towards taking the cause of conservation forward. To give space and a platform for such constructive dialogue, Applied Environmental Research Foundation, Pune and The Save the Western Ghats Group organized the 'Save the Western Ghats Meet, 'Practitioners' Conclave' at Mahabaleshwar from 30th November to 2nd December 2012. This was a stakeholders' meet for all likeminded people united by the vision of protecting the Western Ghats. The conclave saw around 300 delegates from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Puducherry (Pondichery), New Delhi, Meghalaya and Gujarat from India. The participants included members of the civil society, activists, researchers, government officials, artists, writers, corporate officials and students. This 3 day concave was marked by a number of informative and deliberative sessions and workshops on various concerns of the Western Ghats. Renowned speakers like Mr. Anupam Mishra, Prof. Madhav Gadgil, and Dr. V.B. Mathur addressed the participants. This meet also marked 25 years of the historic Save the Western Ghats March of 1987/88, a 100 days environmental campaign of civil society, and saw a large number of erstwhile marchers attend the conclave with renewed vigor and enthusiasm.



One of the key attractions of SWG Mahabaleshwar conclave was the celebration of the Indigenous Day on 1st December which was marked by a highly successful food festival. The idea of indigenous day and food festival, its link to Save the Western Ghats Movement and its subsequent impacts, opportunities and lessons of this initiative, are discussed in this report.

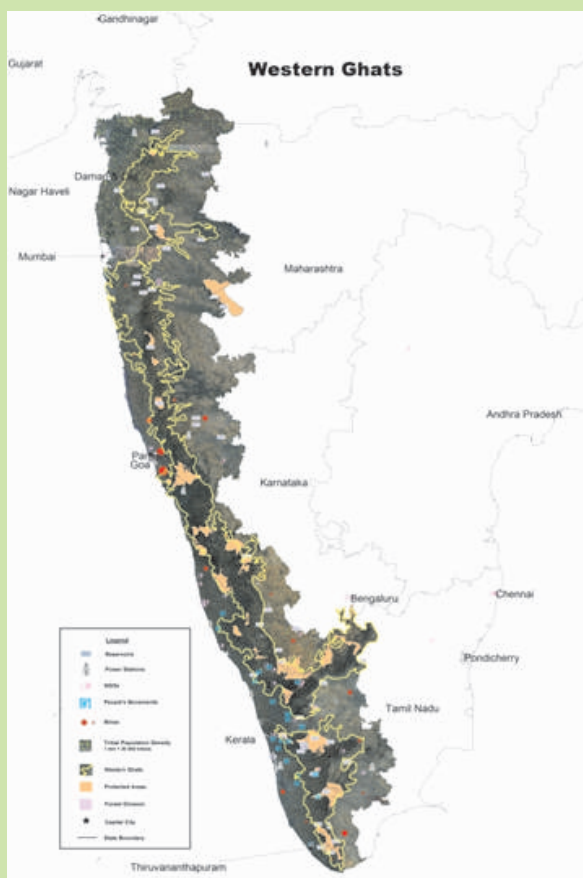


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NTRODUCTION



The Western Ghats of India spreads across 6 states house a multitude of floral and faunal species. But what also posits immense importance on this ecological heritage is that, it sustains and fosters people from various communities and cultures. The Western Ghats are home to many indigenous communities whose culture, lives and livelihoods are marked by a deep connection with nature. The mountain chain called Western Ghats, comprising of 51 districts in six states, run along the western coast of India across 1600 kilometers. It is the source of water for the entire Deccan plateau and home to 300 million people.



The Western Ghats are a treasure trove of natural resources and the members of indigenous communities through ages have used these gifts of nature to carve out for themselves, a pristine way of life. The traditions followed by these communities are often found to be environmentally just and fostering a sense of reverence to the nature and human relationship. This bond is reflected in almost every aspect of their social and religious life. There is thus a lot to learn from the members of these indigenous communities about the way in which they perceive nature and the role of the mountains in their lives and livelihoods.

Western Ghats of India

Source : www.keystonefoundation.org

But, it is also the members of indigenous communities who have to face the direct brunt of the rabid destructive practices that the Western Ghats are being subjected to. destruction of forests, pollution of water resources, large scale industrialization, flawed environmental policies and restrictions on use of forest produce are all directed towards a drastic altering of the way of life that the members of these communities are used to. The sanctity which they have traditionally associated with nature as the nurturer, the sustainer is now changing in the globalized world. While value systems are open to change, most of these changes are appearing to be forced and spurred on by desperation and a losing battle for survival in an ever changing world. It is not just an attempt to capture and tame nature for economic benefits but also a direct attempt at branding indigenous cultures and ways of life as regressive and anti-development. There have been many protracted struggles by the indigenous communities to fight for their rights over their land, their water, their forests and their lives. While many have been resounding success stories, many have left them further impoverished.

But, the crucial point to be understood here is that it is impossible to think of the Western Ghats in its ecological and social moorings, without putting the cause of the indigenous communities in focus. This conclave aimed at bringing up various issues of the Western Ghats out in a public forum to be discussed, debated and deliberated upon. The key discussions centered on the role of stakeholders in the process of conservation and the way they could make a difference, a contribution towards the protection of the biodiversity of the Western Ghats. It is a common understanding that this process of engaging with the stakeholders would entail giving adequate space to the indigenous communities of the Western Ghats whose lives and livelihoods are deeply intertwined with the biodiversity of the region. Their local wisdom as well as the cultural and religious association with the flora and fauna of the region is a treasure trove of insights and knowledge into the understanding of the area. Their perspectives on conservation, sustainable utilization of the resources and protection of the ecological wealth is a major influence and a definite indicator of the measures which need to be implemented to bring about a synergy between man and nature.

With these views in mind, the second day of the conclave was declared as the 'Indigenous Communities' Day'. This day was dedicated to understanding the views of the members of various indigenous communities regarding forest conservation, the idea of development and the way they see the roles of other stakeholders like civil society, government and the corporate panning out in the process of conservation. This day focused on understanding the Western Ghats from the perspective of the Indigenous communities, their lives and their struggles.



I R A T I O N A L E

In recent years, the idea of food festivals as a means of promoting Agro-Biodiversity and strengthening local food sovereignty has picked up. The indigenous communities within this vast landscape are instrumental in protecting agrobiodiversity as well as forests through their rich food culture. However in the larger conservation debate and action there is seldom scope for them to discuss and share and create opportunities to promote both their knowledge and food traditions. Therefore showcasing indigenous food through a food festival is an important tool to initiate such debate. The Save the Western Ghats Practitioners Conclave was one such opportunity to provide a platform and to create a possibility of exchange, dialogue with the indigenous communities for the non indigenous community stakeholders. It is extremely important to link the local foods of these communities to the markets, and food festivals are one such step to begin the process.

The indigenous knowledge regarding the rich food traditions of the communities and knowledge of related agrobiodiversity conservation is dwindling very fast. Within the community there are knowledge holders but there are no incentives to maintain or disseminate their knowledge to younger generation within the community or to general public.

Another important question is how to integrate the knowledge holders in the process of benefits of maintaining the knowledge and resource management systems, as well as how to develop a system for promoting such knowledge holders. Such integration could be possible in a number of ways and one them could be food festivals. Western Ghats, also harbor varieties of agricultural systems, diverse cultures maintaining such systems and has a large number of civil society groups working with these indigenous communities. To develop the perspective of indigenous food cultures, agrobiodiversity conservation and promoting knowledge holders among civil society groups, food festivals could be a platform to begin the exchange and sharing and may help forming collaborations to promote both livelihoods of the indigenous communities as well as conservation in general and agrobiodiversity conservation in particular.

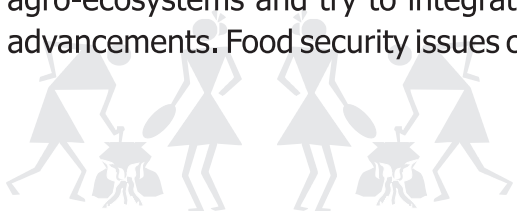
Therefore to address the issue of food security, sovereignty, conservation of agrobiodiversity as well as searching and promoting local indigenous knowledge holders from Western Ghats, a food festival has been organized as a part of civil society meet at Mahabaleshwar.



There have been numerous food festivals organized to showcase the cuisines and cultures of the communities from the states of North Eastern India recently. In October 2012, a hugely successful Food Festival had been conducted in St. Edmund's College, Shilling which attracted an audience of nearly 5000 members. This festival provided various indigenous communities to adequately showcase their local cuisines, talk about the nutritional values associated with it and attract the younger members of their communities to preserve their local culture and customs. Food festivals are an important chance to not only discuss about local nutritious cuisines but an insight into the biodiversity of the region. Historical customs followed with regards to food procurement and preparations give an insight into the local produce of the region and the way it is used and protected by the local communities. Hence, food festivals are an important part of understanding issues of biodiversity conservation and can shed a lot of light on using local resources in the most sustainable and nutritious way. It was with this idea in mind that we decided to include a Food Festival in the schedule of events for the conclave as the main event for the 'Indigenous Day Celebrations'.

Since, this was a novice attempt on our part; we sought guidance from the veterans in the field of promoting Indigenous rights through local food sovereignty. Mr. Phrang Roy helped us through every step of planning the Food Festival and most importantly supported this food festival through 'Indigenous Partnerships for Agro-Biodiversity and Food Sovereignty'. Indigenous Partnerships has been committed to the goal of strengthening and developing Agro-Biodiversity and local food networks and promoting independent dialogue and communication between communities and other stakeholders with regards to food sovereignty. They have been actively promoting healthy dialogues trying to integrate traditional wisdom of indigenous communities with recent scientific advancements to facilitate a holistic understanding of the nature of food sovereignty in the region. They also undertake advocacy and intervention based roles to promote the welfare of the indigenous communities by liaising with the Government and other stakeholder agencies. Therefore, Indigenous Partnerships was a partner who shared with us the common concern about the conservation of the Western Ghats and the crucial role of the local communities in making it possible. The association with them motivated us and helped us bridge gaps in our understanding of conceiving the Food Festival as well as helped us to tie the loose ends while implementing the plan.

Food festivals are an important part of understanding why autonomy should be granted to Indigenous communities to decide their own development path to food and agriculture. These festivals provide the much needed platform to speak about traditional agro-ecosystems and try to integrate this Indigenous knowledge with wider scientific advancements. Food security issues cannot always be quelled through agricultural



methods which are promoted by globalization and there is a need to look inwards into local ecosystems for attaining food sovereignty. Bringing various communities together on one platform also serves the additional purpose of sharing success stories, aiding network formation and deliberating on best practices which can address the question of food security of Indigenous communities. The Western Ghats spans across 6 Indian states and has diverse agricultural practices and cultural moorings. The Indigenous communities who live in close proximity with these biodiversity rich areas have

developed their own location specific, livelihood strategies which are drawn from their traditional knowledge base. They have also developed adaptation strategies to face adverse climate change and account for their own food security . Modern methods of agriculture, commercialization of land holdings, exploitative ancillary industries are all degrading traditional agro-ecosystems and makes it imperative for us to go back to means advocated by these Indigenous communities. These local food systems have the potential to be marketed effectively which will promote food security and also help preserve the traditional knowledge. This Food festival was also an attempt to promote the marketability of these food cultures of Indigenous communities. It is an important discourse to be followed in the wider engagement with issues of conservation in the Western Ghats. This Food Festival was aimed to be an entry point into such deliberations and exchange of ideas which can make the Conclave more holistic and enriching.

The celebration of the Indigenous Day in general and the Food Festival in particular has given a new dimension to the Save the Western Ghats Movement which has been revived since 2009. Though the issues of the indigenous communities were featured in the discussions in the previous meetings, this was the first time that they were given adequate space to present their ideas and views. Nearly 60 members from various Indigenous communities of the Western Ghats were present for all the 3 days of the Conclave and actively took part in all the discussions and sessions. There was ample opportunity for members of civil society organizations and researchers to interact with them and exchange ideas on conservation, local forest management and practices promoting food security and agro-biodiversity. They not only spoke about the issues concerning them but used the medium of the Food Festival to validate how their local and traditional knowledge can find favor with a larger audience and promote sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods. The Western Ghats with all its demographic diversity and rich ecological heritage needs initiatives like these to bridge the gaps in understanding and promoting Indigenous knowledge and culture. This is an attempt that the movement endorses and shall try to replicate with each new initiative that we take up in the coming years.



2 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this Food Festival was to aid the dissemination and promotion of the local cuisines, local agro-biodiversity and cultures of the indigenous communities of the Western Ghats. The local practices of food production, consumption and distribution are intrinsically tied to the idea of conservation of local biodiversity of the Western Ghats. Hence this food festival was a critical link towards helping to form a holistic understanding of the issues of the region. The organizers also had the intention of promoting nutritious food practices and use of medicinal plants as done by the various Indigenous communities. This would sensitize the wider population towards much lesser known yet nutritious food practices, cultivation of these resources and help the communities work towards local food sovereignty.

The other objective was to use the idea of local cuisines as a means of community mobilization to form a more informed and active social base to work



towards conservation, specifically agro-biodiversity conservation. The idea of food being intrinsically connected to land and biodiversity would aid in this mobilization and help build more sustainable and long term partnerships.

The final objective was to create a knowledge base wherein the wider audience and especially the youth are made aware of the traditional knowledge and wisdom of the indigenous communities. The effort would be to generate interest in their food and culture so that there are further efforts to preserve, protect and reclaim it from the sweep of globalization.

3 NETWORKING MEASURES

The idea of Food Festivals in the Western Ghats was a relatively new concept and there were very few precedents to base our preparations on. Though there were many exhibitions showcasing handicrafts and dry food material prepared by members of indigenous communities, there have not been many Food Festivals organized. The only recent Food Festival happened in the year 2009 in Wayanad, Kerala but was limited to showcasing only Rice based products from the state. Therefore, we had to start from scratch with the networking measures to identify groups who are working in the field of local food sovereignty in the Western Ghats and are looking for opportunities to market and showcase the local produce. The ground work for the Food Festival began in the month of August. We scouted various online resources for Food Festivals conducted in the Western Ghats to form a preliminary database of organizations and groups who might be interested in taking part in the Food Festival. We found out that the cuisines and cultures of the indigenous communities of the Western Ghats have not been marketed extensively and when they are, it is mostly limited to dry food items like Papads, Chips and Pickles. Though these items also form a crucial part of their cuisines, livelihood and have a saleable appeal to it, the food items which they consume on a day to day basis also need to be presented. Hence, our objective was to promote the day to day cuisines of these communities so as to make the people aware of their nutritious value and the way in which they optimally make use of various local forest and agricultural produce.

Through our networking in the state of Kerala we identified, the Ruchie Farmers' Network of Wayanad who worked with the members of the Paniya tribal community. Traditionally Paniyas were food-gatherers enjoying the freedom and self sufficiency of nomadic life in the interior forests. They used edible roots, leaves etc. They also used to eat small creatures like crabs by entrapping them. Although rice is their staple food, considerable quantities of wheat or ragi are consumed by the Paniyas. Tapioca, vegetables, animal flesh, fish, crabs and some varieties of roots and tubes are all

included in their food items. The Ruchie Farmer's Network helped the members of the Paniya community market their products which were made from locally produced Jackfruit and Bamboo. Though the Ruchie Farmers Network had managed to take part in some conferences and sell their products, they were immensely excited to get a platform like the Save the Western Ghats Conclave-Mahabaleshwar. Under the guidance of Mr. C.D Suneesh, independent media personnel from Wayanad, they ventured out for the first time from their native village to a different state to take part in this Conclave. A group of 6 members, all from the Paniya community took part in Food Festival. Mr. C.D. Suneesh is linked with Save the Western Ghats movement since last 25 years as he marched in the Save the Western Ghats March of 1987-88. Apart from food festival Paniya also presented their handicrafts in the conclave.

The second group which expressed interest in the Food Festival was Soliga Community from Karnataka. The Soligas are nomadic people who have lived in the Biligiri Rangan Hills region of South of Karnataka. Soligas means children of bamboo. They live off forests produce like honey, berries, tubers and timber. They also cultivate small farms with pigeon peas, millets and pumpkins but only for their own consumption. Soliga community is so dependent on the biodiversity in their surroundings not just forests, but even the land they wander on. This community mainly resides in the Male Mahadeshwara hills in Karnataka and mostly dependent on minor forest produce which is collected on a daily basis for their dietary requirements.

We got access to this community through Mr. R. P Harisha, an independent researcher who works in association with the Asoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE), Bengaluru. Mr. Harisha works on the documentation of wild edible plants used by the Soliga community and was interested in both showcasing his work and presenting the food prepared by the community members at the Food Festival. Mr. Harisha was joined by 3 members of the community for the Food Festival.



The third group which took part in the Food Festival was from Bhimashankar, which is located in the North Maharashtra. They belonged to the Mahadev Koli community. The Koli people are also called Dongar or Raj Koli. The Koli peoples' primary occupation is agriculture. The Mahadev Koli derive their name from their god Mahadev and live in the Mahadev hills of Maharashtra. They are found mostly in the Pune, Ahmednagar and Nasik districts of Maharashtra. Their staple food consists of rice, nagli, varai and various forest produce.

The food habits and popular cuisines of this region are different from the southern reaches of the Western Ghats. The exhibits presented by the members of the Mahadev Koli community gave us a clear picture of the agro-biodiversity of Northern Maharashtra and the local produce which is used by them for their daily consumption. A total of 15 Mahadev Kolis from Bhimashankar took part in the Conclave and 5 of them handled the stall in the Food Festival.

The fourth group in the Food Festival also came from Maharashtra specifically the Konkan region. The Konkan Western Ghats is a rich agricultural belt and its local cuisine is extremely popular within Maharashtra. This was an opportunity for the people to present this cuisine to a wider audience. This group presented the cuisine of the local community, Kunbi. A group of 6 members led by Mrs. Uma Damle took part in the Food Festival.

The fifth group belonged to the Irula, Kasavar, Urali and Alakurumba communities from Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. This group was coordinated by the Keystone Foundation which participated actively in the organization of SWG Conclave and represented the state of Tamil Nadu in the 'Indigenous Day Celebrations'. Apart from the Food festival, they also presented their handicrafts in the Conclave. A total of 15 members from these indigenous communities took part in the Indigenous Day celebrations and 5 of the members took part in the Food Festival.

The final group which took part in the food festival was the Tribal Foundation, Kanyakumari. During our online research to trace organizations working on food cultures in the Western Ghats, we came across an article in the Chennai edition of The Hindu which documented the work being done in Kanyakumari by environmental educator Mr. S. S Davidson. A little more exploration into the work of Mr. Davidson, put us across to the Tribal Cultural Heritage in India Foundation which is based in Amsterdam. This organization documents the work being done to preserve the local cultures of various communities. It was through them that we got across to Mr.S.S.Davidson who works relentlessly with the Kani community of Tamil Nadu. Mr. Davidson willingly accepted our invitation to take part in the food festival and attended it with 4 other members of his tribal foundation. The Kani tribals are a traditionally nomadic community, who now lead a primarily settled life in the forests of the Agasthyamalai hills of the Western Ghats in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala. The term 'Kan' meaning Katu (forest) becomes the root of the word and so this shows that Kani are people who live in forest.

Agriculture, hunting of wild animals and the collection of honey are the traditional occupation for Kanis. They cultivate paddy once in a year.

In all the food festival saw 6 food stalls from different states of the Western Ghats. The food festival saw the members of 10 different communities and villagers/local people from 3



different areas of the Western Ghats of Maharashtra. Apart from this some of the communities also set up stalls showcasing local handicrafts and dry food items. A number of different and distinct food preparations were showcased and received with a lot of enthusiasm by the assembled delegates. The details of the food preparations shall be highlighted in a later section of the report.

We also undertook extensive networking operations in Gujarat in an attempt to draw the Indigenous communities from the Dang region of Gujarat for the Food Festival. The Dang forms the northern most part of the Western Ghats and is culturally distinct from the rest of the region. We had almost finalized a community from the Dang region to participate in the festival but due to certain unforeseen circumstances, the arrangement could not work out at the final hour. But, we managed to involve Dr. Minoo Parabia from Surat, who has worked extensively on the medicinal plants of the Western Ghats to present his work at the Conclave.



Monkeys at food festival...

The food festival took place out in open at the beautiful forested campus of Maharashtra Tourism Development Complex, Mahabaleshwar, in the heart of North Western Ghats, with only stalls half enclosed. It is a home to many species of animals including two species of monkeys Bonnet Macaque and Hanuman langur. The troops of both these species frequent the campus of MTDC. On the first day of Conclave they liked the stalls and played on it for an hour in the morning and obviously the stalls were damaged or ransacked and everyone was worried about the food festival. The indigenous community members however assured that they will take care of the monkeys and informed that the troops visit only in the mornings and evenings as this campus is on the way of their route to forests. Fortunately the monkeys did not bother us during the festival and some residential spoiled ones (due to feeding by tourists) visited few times but they all could feast on the remnants of food prepared, only on their way back in the evening..



4 THE EVENT

4.1 Indigenous day Inauguration and community perspectives (1st December 2012)

The second day of the conclave i.e. the Indigenous Day celebrations were kicked off with some villagers of Bhimashankar, Maharashtra presenting their traditional folk music called Jagar. 'Jagar' is a traditional art form that uses music as a medium of storytelling. Jagar is performed to invite the deities for any function and to get the blessings of goddess Durga. It taps into the rich traditional folklore of indigenous communities and also highlights the oral dissemination of knowledge and local history. The group presented a humorous rendition of a story from the Ramayana which was received to great applause by the audience. Music is a medium which speaks a lot about the traditional knowledge, histories and the relationship with nature which the members of indigenous communities have believed and preserved since ages. Therefore it was an apt beginning to a day where the focus was on bridging the gap between Indigenous knowledge and scientific advancements.

**Mahadev Koli
community
performing Jagar**



Dr. Archana Godbole, Director of Applied Environmental Research Foundation, Pune inaugurated the session by flagging off some key issues which put the role of the Indigenous communities in the quest of conservation in perspective. She was joined on stage by Dr.Snehalata Nath, Director, Keystone Foundation, Kotagiri and Mr. Phrang Roy, Co-coordinator of Indigenous Partnerships

for Agro-Biodiversity and Food Sovereignty. Mr. Roy was the first speaker in the session and spoke about the changing trend being the world over, where the rights of the Indigenous communities to preserve their own language, their culture, cuisine and above all their right to self determination are gaining credence. He said that traditional knowledge of the Indigenous communities which has often been ridiculed and treated dismissively is now being considered as a repertoire of wisdom which cannot be treated with indifference. As a member of the Khasi indigenous community of Meghalaya, he expressed his solidarity with the communities of the Western Ghats and supported the

initiative of the Food Festival. The problems being faced by all the communities across India are essentially the same and it is extremely important to stand together in solidarity at such critical junctures. He pointed out the crisis associated with climate change, the commercialization of food, the lack of trust in governance and the blind quest towards a life which is inspired by a Western idea of development. He stressed on the fact that in today's world when there is a need for sustainability in growth and development, the traditional knowledge of indigenous communities is much more important than ever before.

The idea of food festivals is to reconnect with one's land and revitalize the biodiversity of the region. Mr. Roy summed up his address by urging the gathered audience to preserve their food cultures because 'The day you lose your food, you lose your biodiversity. The day you lose your biodiversity, you lose your land. And the day you lose your land, you lose your political autonomy'.

The most important part of the first session of the Indigenous Day celebrations were the addresses by the members of the Indigenous communities. Mr. Rangaswamy, a member of the Irula community, who participated in the food festival and Mr. Dharma Lobhi a member of Thakar community from Barshet, Raigad district presented the perspective of the local communities towards the issues of food sovereignty and biodiversity conservation in the Western Ghats. Mr. Rangaswamy from the Erode district of Karnataka is a cultivator engaged in millets farming. He spoke about the nutritional value of the millets that is cultivated mostly in this area. He said that the members of his community find millets to be more nutritious than rice but the Public Distribution System (PDS) does not promote millet cultivation. Therefore, they are finding it increasingly difficult to continue this production. As a means of promoting millets, his group was going to present nearly 7 items from the locally produced millets in the food festival. Mr. Dharma Lobhi spoke about the availability of various kinds of minor produce and fruits from the forest and how the indigenous communities came to be deprived of this produce due to the depletion of the forests. He spoke about the apathy of the forest department which does not consider their knowledge and their expertise in managing their own resources of any value. He said that their indigenous knowledge can at any point be compared to the highly superficial knowledge of the government by just seeing the quality of the trees planted by them. While the trees planted by the locals continue to flourish for years, the forest department trees have to be replanted every year.

The members of the Indigenous communities spoke vocally about the way they perceive nature, their traditional approaches towards conservation and protection of forests and their relationship with the forest officials. The impact of these personal narrations on the dais cannot be compared to an outsider presenting her perspective based on research. The audience understood the rationale behind the conduction of a Food Festival in a Conclave that aimed to speak about issues of Conservation. And this rationale was put

forward and expressed lucidly by the members of Indigenous communities who face the brunt of the 'Development' paradigm. Certain issues are well beyond the realm of theory and only a lived experience is needed to highlight the starkness of it. These narrations propelled the audience to think beyond the issues that are routinely discussed and put into perspective the idea of indigenous food cultures as a means of biodiversity conservation.

Slow Food is an international organization that speaks against the culture of fast food and standardized food. It is a social movement against the changing forms of food in the globalized world and promotes biodiversity. Ms. Anandi Soans from Slow Food India spoke about the need for people to look inwards for better food practices and promote local and natural food production and consumption. She spoke about Slow Food's role in promoting Indigenous food cultures. She also informed people that the 2014 Indigenous Terra Madre (Global Food Festival) was going to be conducted in Shillong, which would put India also in the reckoning in reclaiming indigenous food cultures.

In the session on Indigenous food and knowledge, Mr. Allan Walhang, a lecturer from St. Edmunds College, Shillong spoke about the recent Indigenous Food Festival conducted in Shillong which attracted a massive audience. Through a small documentary he showcased the festival 'Granaries of Memory' and talked about its influence on the younger members of the indigenous communities. This month long food festival was a huge catalyst for them to reclaim their own traditions and come to terms with their importance in this globalized world. This food festival helped in the dissemination of a lot of knowledge about Indigenous practices and local agro-biodiversity. Dr. Minoo Parabia from Surat Gujarat addressed a different aspect of Indigenous knowledge and spoke about the medicinal plants of the Daang region of Gujarat. He said that the GEER Foundation along with the help of 7 universities conducted a survey and found 1275 different species of medicinal plants in Gujarat. He also threw light on the hill millets which are mostly gluten free and the immense nutritional value that they possess. Sadly, the cultivation of millets is gradually decreasing in the Dang. He also spoke about the gap between the producers and the buyers for medicinal plants because of which this immense potential cannot be adequately tapped.



4.2 Food Festival: Stalls and Presentations

The food festival started at around 1.00 pm. There were a total of 6 stalls which together exhibited nearly 30 different dishes and traditional drinks. Apart from these there were dry food stalls and handicrafts stalls by the various communities. All these 6 stalls, prepared fresh food and displayed it for sale. All the dishes were moderately priced and the audience had been provided with a coupon of

Rs. 25 so that they could purchase any dish of their choice. The food festival carried on for 3 hours and all the stalls managed to sell off every cooked item from their table. It was a resounding success and was appreciated by all gathered for the Conclave.

The members of the Paniya community from Ruchie Farmers Network, Wayanad presented a dessert made from bamboo rice. They also presented spiced Jackfruit fries with pepper chutney. Also for sale were Jackfruit Papads, Bamboo Shoot Chatni Powder and Bamboo Rice Iddu. Bamboo and jackfruit were the primary raw products that the Ruchie Farmers Network presented.

The indigenous communities from Nilgiris like Irula, Kurumba presented seven different millets based preparations and a host of dry food items on sale. Their curd rice with chutney, Ragi Murraku, Kambu sweet and Thene Laddu were greatly appreciated by the audience. In keeping with their primary cultivation, Millets based items were showcased in their stalls. Apart from that they had a handicrafts stall which sold a variety of handmade cloth bags and trinkets.

The Soliga community from Karnataka made a wonderful presentation of the minor forest produce which is consumed by the tribals on a daily basis. They presented a juice made from the roots of edible plants and presented a plate of assorted tubers (*Dioscoriea pentaphylla*), green leaves and roots which were fried and served with a tuber pickle. The items which they put up for presentation included edible fruits of *Dimocarpus longan* (Gudagan jagadi) which belongs to the family of Sapindaceae. Mr. Harisha interacted with the audience about the way this forest produce is procured on a daily basis. According to Mr. Harisha, the biggest challenges pertaining to the cultivation of wild edible plants is their ex-situ cultivation, domestication and subsequent management. These plants provide ground cover which helps in preventing soil erosion and therein lies their major contribution towards conservation.

The Tribal Foundation from Kanyakumari used tapioca and local herbs as the main



ingredient of their preparations. They presented a Herbal tulsi (basil) tea which was a hot seller at the festival. They also prepared Kollutai which is a baked item made of rice flour, spices, sugar and herbal leaves. Apart from these they served baked tapioca which chutney and had a variety of banana and tapioca chips, cardamom, cloves etc. for sale.

The Kaani tribal community inhabits the forests of Kanyakumari in 48 settlements in the Western Ghats. Once a nomadic tribe, they have settled in the deep forests and jungles. They draw their livelihood and sustenance from forest resources and their entire life revolves round forest ecology. The staple food is Tapioca. They also cultivate a wild paddy strain called **Karai-Nel**. But owing to human versus animal conflict, the community is not concentrating on these cultivations in large scale. They cultivate Banana, Tubers, Coconut, Areca nut and Cashew nut, Rubber, Spices, Silk cotton and Vegetables. Owing to Human versus Animal conflict, agro-forestry is facing many serious questions. Tribal Foundation is seeking alternative avenues to avoid the conflict. They consume Mango and Jack-Fruit collected from the wild and extract wine from some species of Palms. They gather mushrooms and wild honey and hunt small animals such as Rabbit, tortoise, bandicoot, white rat, Boa, mouse-deer, mountain bats and birds using nets, traps and noose.

They have a rich knowledge of ethno-botany, that they treat diseases with the indigenous form of Siddha. As they are forest dwellers, they are adept in elephant tracking and the Forest department seeks their help in the case of elephant versus human conflict. Tribal Foundation is helping them to develop their economic, social, cultural, environmental status and protect the precious forest ecology of the Western Ghats by creating environmental awareness. This Food Festival was an opportunity for the foundation to showcase this rich culinary and cultural heritage of the Kaani community.

The Mahadev Koli group from Bhimashankar presented the Dangar Bhakar made with rice flour and pumpkin stuffing. They had also prepared a traditional dish called Kakad PISOI which uses Cucumber as the primary ingredient. They also presented these fresh vegetables from their villages at the stall. The group from Konkan represented the local community, Kunbi. They presented many fried delicacies made from rice flour and an aromatic appetizing drink called Solkadi (from Garcinia indica fruits) which was hugely appreciated by the audience.

In all a total of 325 conclave participants attended the food festival. They were present for the highly informative opening session of the indigenous communities day and took part in the Food Festival with a lot of enthusiasm.

The inauguration of the Food festival, addresses, community perspectives and the commencement of the festival has all been video graphed. An archive of over 200 photographs has been prepared. All these material can be obtained on our website www.savethewesternghats.org.

5

IMAPCTS

5.1 General Impact

- This was an awareness building exercise for nearly 325 people who had gathered for the conclave. Through pertinent dialogue with the panel of guests and with subsequent interactions with the members of the indigenous communities, it was an informative journey for the delegates. They could get the glimpses of Agro-biodiversity, local food sovereignty, nutrition and the relationship between culture and cuisine. The audience could appreciate the diversity of preparation and the richness of flavor and taste brought to them by the various communities of the Western Ghats. It also threw light on the local produce, procurement methods and consumption practices of these communities. They also came to be aware of the global trend in reclaiming Indigenous food cultures and traditions.
- It is not only food festival but the day dedicated to indigenous communities provided much visibility to the indigenous communities from the Western Ghats, for the first time. This day was open free and non indigenous stakeholders/participants made best use of the opportunity to interact with the tribal people. The voice of the indigenous people was captured truly by the media and is evident from many stories put in local media about this unique good festival.
- Through our publicity efforts through the media before the Conclave and with the circulation of the outcomes of the festival in the form of newsletters and summarized reports, the reach of this knowledge has expanded further. This will help in strengthening the knowledge bank on Indigenous food practices.
- This event was widely reported in local and national newspapers and will help in drawing the attention of the people towards food festival of this nature which has been conducted in Maharashtra for the first time. It is also one of the very few successful food festivals conducted in the Western Ghats.
- Sharing the experience of the members of the Indigenous communities is also crucial to understand the true scope of its impact. The participants of the food festival found it to be a unique opportunity to showcase the diversity and richness of their cuisine. For many of them it was the first food festival that they attended and they have certainly warmed up to the idea of attending many more of such festivals to give their local produce more visibility.



- It was a networking opportunity for the various indigenous communities to market their produce. With the large number of civil society members being present, it could provide them with a lot of contacts and opportunities which they could utilize in the near future.
- The food festival helped showcase the primary raw materials which are increasingly losing out to the more profitable options. Millets, Tapioca, Bamboo were presented in various forms in the festival and may give the resurgence needed to their continued cultivation.
- There was renewed interest shown in the traditional cuisine of North Maharashtra for which there is dwindling interest in the cities and urban areas. This may help in promoting traditional cuisines in the urban areas instead of only focusing on standardized food. There were offers to conduct similar food festivals focusing on the cuisine of North Maharashtra in the near future.
- The Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation has showed interest in organizing the food festival of indigenous communities as a part of their tourism promotional activities.
- The food festival took place out in open at the beautiful forested campus of Maharashtra Tourism development Complex, Mahabaleshwar in the heart of North Western Ghats, with only stalls half enclosed. It was a free exchange of thoughts, flavors, and knowledge among the different indigenous communities as well as other stakeholders attended the food festival.



5.2 Media Impact

- The Save the Western Ghats Conclave has been covered by 20 local and national media houses belonging both to the print and electronic media. This has given the much needed exposure to this food festival.
- In the planning stages of the food festival, we had a lot of press coverage from Times of India, Sakal and Lokmat which publicized the event.
- Individual reports on the food festival were printed on 2nd December 2012 in the Marathi newspapers Sakal and Lokmat.
- There was a feature in the Hindu, Chennai edition (5th December 2012) on the Kaani community of Kanyakumari taking part in the food festival.
- The Conclave and the food festival have been publicized in the Social Media through face book and twitter.



7 CHALLENGES & LEARNING

- The members of the various Indigenous communities and the audience present spoke in various languages like Marathi, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam. We have tried our best to provide translation as we have translated Marathi of Dharma Lobhi on the dais as well as Rangaswami on the dais in English /Marathi. Throughout the event we have tried to ensure that the communication between the various members is well facilitated. There was no issue when it was one to one communications among tribals and non tribals as someone from the groups would help. But sometimes all the discussions on other days in the sessions have not been translated especially in the tribal or local languages. The translation on other two days would have been appreciated.
- There could have been a greater use of the visual medium like screening documentaries and having smaller action group discussions on Gastronomy, Food Preparation and Agro-Biodiversity to bring more depth into the discussions. However the groups interacted on these informally throughout the food festival.
- There could have been further circulation of leaflets and printed material for the participants to disseminate more information.



8 FUTURE ACTIONS

Civil society groups already working in the Western Ghats for Environment & Development could certainly use the learning's into their future action plans. Some discussions with various NGOs could capture following suggestions.

- Promote issues of local food sovereignty during field interventions and use it as a tool to mobilize communities for efforts of conservation on the ground. Draw strong links and present the relationship between food cultures, biodiversity protection and land rights to highlight the importance of promoting and preserving local food traditions.

Help promote traditional cuisines and handicrafts and bridge the gap between producers and potential markets so as to give a sustainable source of income to the Indigenous groups.

- Use the media to promote the issue of food sovereignty as something that is intrinsically linked to questions of political autonomy and rights of the communities in concern. Use monthly newsletters, magazines and participation in networking opportunities as a medium to express solidarity with efforts towards food sovereignty and help promote the same.
- Involve the youth of the communities and the youth of the urban areas to understand and exchange information about local food cultures. Involve school children as an early means of sensitization.
- Proactively engage other organizations and government bodies in supporting such initiatives.



LIST OF PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Name of Organization	Indigenous Community	Place	State	Number of members
Ruchie Farmers Network	Paniya	Wayanad	Kerala	6
Tribal Foundation	Kaani	Kanyakumari	Tamil Nadu	5
Asoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE)	Soliga	M.M Hills	Karnataka	4
Keystone Foundation	Irula, Kasavar, Urali, Alakuramaba	Nilgiris	Tamil Nadu	15
Applied Environmental Research Foundation	Mahadev Koli	Bhimashankar (NWG)	Maharashtra	15
Mrs. Uma Damle and group	Local community (Kunbi)	Konkan (NWG)	Maharashtra	6

Other indigenous community participated but did have food stall was Thakars from Maharashtra. List of indigenous participants and general list of conclave participants are attached herewith.

References:

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