

Forest Post: A Western Ghats tale of conservation entrepreneurs fighting the good fight

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It was in 2017 at an 'Adavi' exhibition that a woman approached Dr Manju Vasudevan and asked if she had any Shatavari-based products for her pregnant daughter. Dr Manju quickly showed her the pickle bottles but the woman wasn't impressed. Her daughter didn't like pickles. "What else have you got?" she asked.

Manju's mind took a quick journey down memory lane when as a youngster she was on a trekking expedition with the Kani tribals in Thiruvananthapuram's Agastyamala forest range. It was during this adventure that she came across the Shatavari (Asparagus) plant for the first time.

When they saw the plant, the Kani elders uprooted it, skinned the root and dipped it in the small bottle of honey they always carry around before offering it to her. Eureka! It combined the popularity of Amla Murabba in markets with the nostalgia of munching the raw muddy root. She asked the team to get bottles ready for the new item...

Today, the Shatavari in honey is one of Forest Post's most prized products. "I think the copyright for the product should belong to the Kani tribes and myself," said Manju laughing.

"This product wouldn't have been made if not for that event and the conversation. That's what has been missing these past two years under Covid restrictions," she added.

The 'Adavi' exhibitions have been held by the River Research Centre (RRC), a Thrissur-based grassroots NGO since 2017. Their events showcase value-added forest products made at various collectives in the Karuvannur and Chalakkudy river basins in central Kerala's Western Ghats.

RRC's forest produce-based Adivasi women's enterprises were an extension of their work in making forests count. The journey has reached six villages from the initial two, all located in the two river basins. Four years down the line, products made in these enterprises have now been brought under an umbrella brand.

Named 'Forest Post', the brand engages with forest-dwelling Kadar, Malayar and Muthuvar tribal communities and encourages them to harvest minor forest products (MFPs) in a way that can help them find secure livelihoods close to their homes without jeopardizing the future of the forests. The handmade products the brand brings to the table include beeswax personal care, bamboo craft, herbal hair oils and rare wild foods inspired by indigenous cuisine.

Spreading wings, dreaming big

"Initially, we thought of naming the project 'Adavi' which means forest in Kadar language. But then we wanted something that is easily searchable and can be associated with forest conservation. Not many brands with forest in their name can actually claim to work for people of the forest. But we can say that as we work from the forest and for the forest! It gave us an identity," said Manju.

Becoming a brand doesn't mean Forest Post changed its style of work. The grassroots work with MFP harvesters gives Forest Post the luxury of speaking to the community and understanding their seasonal harvest traditions. There is always an upper limit for the number of forest products that will be harvested, especially if these are resources consumed by wild animals. Sustainability is the keyword from the word go.

"An example is the mooty fruit, which is much loved by elephants and deer as much as by children in the Adivasi villages. In low fruiting years, our harvester network is alerted not to collect anything for value addition. This is why the Mooty Preserve or jam was produced only in one August in the past five years. We try to focus on the produce that can be harvested sustainably, such as Queen Sago and Shatavari.

"Forest beeswax-based soaps sans palm oil is a unique selling point for us. Some say we can bring down the price by substituting coconut with palm oil. But do we want to be responsible for more rainforests being denuded for palm oil plantations? I don't think our forest women would be happy about it either. We are making a statement against palm oil!," says Manju, who has herself spent a good part of her career doing habitat surveys and pollination studies in the forests of Western Ghats. But how can a brand grow without increasing production? The conservation entrepreneurs have got that figured out too. "We can expand by exploring more areas to find new products than exploiting the same item," she says. They also plan to reach out to Adivasi communities in places such as Chhattisgarh where markets are exploitative.

Manju and her partner Dr Sreeja KG strongly believe that securing forest-dependent livelihoods for indigenous people is a means to reach the end that is conservation. Sreeja's expertise is in climate change and resilience amidst smallholder producer economies.

Support systems

From exploring local buyers and organic stores in Thrissur to finding international buyers, Forest Post has come a long way. They have received empanelment from TRIFED (Tribal Co-Operative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited) in October 2020. This has meant credibility for their products and increased visibility through major outlets of Tribes India and their e-commerce platform. The women are travelling to Delhi later this year to participate in a fair.

While networks helped them to find potential buyers earlier, getting the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) onboard was the game-changer. It provided the group with the professional help of management consultants, accountants branding strategists.

How the collective changes lives

The Muthuvar women of Adichilthotti settlement in Edamalar make Kannadi Paaya -- the community's signature weave. Women take great effort in harvesting the reed bamboos all by themselves and work at least a couple of weeks on it.

"This is an authentic product and can be branded like the Kancheepuram saree. It is not easy to put a price on a craft that demands such finesse. It is beyond craft; it encompasses the cultural history of a people, a whole way of life. It is encouraging to see people value these rare weaves".

Forest Post's intervention has helped the basket weavers as well. While the weaver women used to sell a few baskets every month in the nearby town of Malakkapara, today their production has increased almost five-fold due to the marketing efforts of Forest Post. In a recent batch that was readied for Victoria in Australia, one of the master weavers named Nagamma made almost 90 baskets and she claims never to have generated so much income from basketry alone.

Inherent feminism

Conservation and tribal rights apart, the brand has also successfully opened an array of opportunities and financial independence to the women of these settlements. Some women who were initially reluctant to even receive payments fearing alcoholic men in the household now have bank accounts of their own.

They also go out for bamboo harvest without the support of men. Some of them have travelled to other institutions to offer training sessions. "I see these as exercises in confidence-building and opening up decision-making spaces in our enterprises," says Manju.

Tough road ahead

However, all is not well for Forest Post. Running on voluntary mode since July 2020, they are staring at an uncertain future due to financial challenges. The UNDP support will keep them going till December, but the group is on their own afterwards.

Travel is the biggest expense as none of the villages have phone connections. Every time something needs to get done, a vehicle needs to be hired. To increase cosmetic productions, they need a drug license which demands a building that is at least 1000 sq ft in size.

"We'll have to rent a building near Vellikulangara -- the nearest town. But then the rent becomes a burden along with the transportation charges. We are hopeful friends will invest so that we can run for another year," Manju says.

Forest Post is also open to accepting CSR funding if interested parties come forward. They have no demands but one - don't ask to compromise on the values driving them.

"While growth is crucial to keep the women meaningfully employed, it is important to keep it small and sustainable. There is a limit to the scalability of wild products and conservation is uncompromisable. Anything sourced from the wild has a high conservation value. When you receive a parcel from Forest Post, know that you are also contributing to conservation and indigenous livelihoods in a small way," Manju notes.

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