

Stories from the Forest

A report of field work conducted for Junglescapes in Chik Yel Chetti village and surrounding villages near Bandipur National Park.



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1. Project Proposal and Execution Details

The original project proposal was to collect information on the following three topics:

- a. The perceptions of local people living around the periphery of the Bandipur National Park of the forests and conservation and the benefits/disadvantages from these to them. The survey focuses on understanding the different ways in which the local people interact with the forests adjacent to them and what their perceptions are of the park's aim of conserving the Western Ghats ecologies.
- b. The project also endeavors to understand the role of monetary rewards or an economic linkage to conservation for creating a sense of ownership amongst the local people for their ecology and also in motivating them to avoid exploitation of the park and thus contribute towards the park's conservation effort.
- c. A third goal of the project is to explore the role of factors such as urbanization, economic growth, rapid lifestyle changes, exposure through TV and increasing poverty on the traditional forest way of life of these people which was sustainable but may be fast disappearing.

These objectives were suitably modified as per the local situations. The aspect of women's self help groups was included. The villages covered were Chik Yel Chetti (consisting mainly of Solega tribals), Giddukere village (Jenu Kurubas) and Lökkere (Kurubas).

The methods used were as below:

- a. Discussions and one to one talks with women and men of different ages.
- b. Discussions with the women's Self Help Group members at Chik Yel Chetti.
- c. Several women's group meetings were also held during which it was not unusual for a few men to be present.
- d. A mapping workshop held for Chik Yel Chetti village women where 4 men were also present.
- e. Participation in a 2 day bee keeping training workshop held by Junglescapes for 8 villagers from Lökkere, Budhikatte and Guddukere.
- f. Participation in the social forestry initiative conducted by Junglescapes in association with a corporate sponsor in Bangalore (Netserv) in November 2011. This covered the villagers in Chik Yel Chetti.
- g. Participation in discussions with villagers in Chik Yel Chetti as preparation for the lantana craft training workshop.

2. Observations

2.1 The perceptions of local people living around the periphery of the Bandipur National Park of the forests and conservation and the benefits/disadvantages from these to them.

Forests and Conservation

- a) The villagers' interaction with the forest is limited mostly to cattle grazing, and collecting firewood. To some extent they also collect honey and certain roots and tubers. However they do not seem to be interested to cut trees or any sort of hunting as this will attract huge fines.
- b) There was a unanimous appreciation for the forest and the need for it to be healthy. This was also their idea of conservation; maintaining a healthy forest which is essential for living.
- c) A few of the elderly villagers remember how the forest was thick and dense when they were young. They said they have seen the forests becoming degraded over

the last 30 years and said because of this they had less rainfall. However, most younger people do not have this past knowledge.

- d) The main activity that impacts the forests is cattle and goat grazing. While many of the villagers do not have cattle, most have goats. Some of them also maintain cattle belonging to outside villagers, which are kept only for grazing purposes. There is no practice of stall-feeding and all cattle are taken into the forest for grazing. The villagers consider this their right and do not seem to be aware of the damage caused to the forests by the grazing activity.
- e) Guddukere, which is a Jenu Kuruba village, has the lowest number of cattle or goats. These are honey gathering tribals and are not cattle grazers traditionally. This may be one of the reasons for this.

3 Wildlife

- a) Human-elephant conflict is significant. This takes the shape of crop raids or risk to people being attacked.
- b) However their attitude is not one of hatred. They accept it as a part of life. Some of the people I spoke to even said that they were intruders in the elephant territory so they must bear the losses that come with that.
- c) There is not much fear regarding other wildlife such as tigers, leopards, snakes etc. The people do not seem to be facing any trouble from these animals, although occasional attacks by leopards on cattle do happen.
- d) No harmful activities like setting traps or poisoning of animals has been observed in the last 5 years.

4 Forest Department

- a) The recent intimation by the Forest department that the area has been notified as a Eco Sensitive Zone (Zone1) has created a lot of concern and anger among the villagers. They are worried by reports that they may have to relocate. A reading of the draft notification makes it clear that there is no relocation required, but certain activities like cattle grazing, putting up of solar fences and growing of alien crops are not allowed. Hence the fear of relocation although not justified is quite prevalent.
- b) There is a perception that the forest department does not do enough to protect the forests and is responsible for its degradation.
- c) There were a few objections from some people about specific steps that the department has taken that have not been beneficial. For example, the check dams were built along the stream near CYC to create small ponds for elephants to drink water from. This however has been quite damaging to the tree around the ponds causing them to die due to their inability to survive in stagnant water.
- d) Another instance of problems is difficulty in getting the compensation offered by the forest department for crop damage due to elephants.
- e) Junglescapes has observed that the Kollegal Forest department (under which these villages fall) has been very supportive of conservation initiatives involving the villagers. They also highlighted that the Lokkere Village Forest Committee (VFC) has done a good job of regenerating around 600 acres of forest lands that lie between Chik Yel Chetti and Lokkere. Most villagers in Lokkere and Guddukere are members of the VFC. They have seen good regeneration of this tract of forest and a good increase in animal movement. This is considered one of the successful VFCs in the State.

5 Traditional and Current Lifestyle

- a) When asked if they believe they have knowledge of the old way of living in the forest, they deny it. They seem to feel that since they have not been living that way since a long time, they have lost the knowledge. However there seems to still be some wisdom alive regarding the forest food, trees, and animals. For example Chik Bantaya from Boodikatte had remarkable knowledge about bees. Siddappa from Lokkere, Kamakshamma and Subbanna from Chik Yel Chetti know quite a bit about which plants are good to eat and which are used as medicines to heal wounds. But when asked pointedly, they say they don't know anything.
- b) Younger generation seems to be completely disconnected from the old way of living of their forefathers. For example many of the Jenu Kuruba youngsters are not used to collection of honey from the forest and said they were afraid of being stung by the bees.
- c) There seems to be no desire to go the city. In fact there is fear of being sent to the city. They do not think they will be able to survive there. They feel comfortable with the place and the lives they live right now. However, the practice of going across the border to Tamilnadu and Kerala for temporary work in estates for short periods is not uncommon among the menfolk.
- d) It is important to note that the villagers of Guddukere (Jenu Kurubas) are more reserved and wary of outsiders than in Chik Yel Chetti or Lokkere.
- e) Most houses have Television connections and it is common to see Dish antennas. Hence the influence of TV on their lifestyles is likely to be high. The small village shop in Chik Yel Chetti sells products like Fair and Lovely, Britannia biscuits, etc.
- f) Education in Chik Yel Chetti is normally limited to 5 standard as the local school is upto 5 standard. They have to go to another village 7 kms away for higher classes. Children tend to drop out after standard 5 as the parents do not have the time to escort them to the other village thereafter.

6 Junglescapes

- a) Often there was a comparison drawn between the forest department and Junglescapes. The people seemed to have more hope of reform from NGOs like Junglescapes than the forest department.
- b) There is seems to be enough motivation to attend workshops on the surface. During my stay, Junglescapes had arranged a 2 day workshop for training in bee keeping at a place called Vazhathotam near Mudumalai. The training was attended by 8 villagers from three villages.
- c) My learning from the bee keeping workshop is given below;
The initial preparation for the workshop involved making several visits to Guddekere and Buddhikatte. The villagers responded enthusiastically in Buddhikatte and reluctantly in Guddekere. Eventually on the actual day of the workshop almost half the villagers from both villages who had given their names backed out. The Guddekere villagers had to be coaxed to attend the workshop in the final few hours. However once they became involved in the workshop that was excellently conducted by Keystone Foundation, they showed enthusiasm and interest. The main positive observation was their urge to learn about bee keeping not only from the facilitator but also from their own village elders. They were keen to work together as a group. On returning to their villages they got together as a group and found honey combs and bees from their surrounding areas for their bee boxes.

- d) I participated in a new social forestry project initiated by Junglescapes in November 2011. About 400 saplings were distributed to 15 villagers in Chik Yel Chetti to be grown on their personal lands. Volunteers from a Bangalore based company called Netserv were present and worked with some of the villagers in planting the saplings. The villagers under this project will get Rs 5 every three months for each sapling that survives. The trees will belong to the villagers and they can use them as wood for building their homes, food, fodder, etc.
- e) My learning from the social forestry project and the way people participated is given below;
Some of the villagers were quite keen to receive the saplings. What they felt would be a benefit to them could be seen through their sapling selection. They were keen on planting saplings of Teak, Tamarind, and Neem since they are useful to the villagers. While some villagers immediately planted their saplings with the help of the Netserv volunteers, others had not planted all of them even a week after they were given the saplings. However the villagers seemed to be obviously motivated by the quarterly monetary incentive as well as the long term benefits of the trees.
- f) People have a lot of initial hesitations whenever a new project is started and they seem to be wary of new activities that they are not used to. They seem to be comfortable working as daily labourers in the fields and get their wages at the end of each day. This may be because of the need for daily wages to keep their families going, as opposed to activities like bee keeping or lantana craft that might take longer time to give economic returns.
- g) At the moment they are willing to work on alternative sustainable livelihoods only as a part time job. They would like to continue their daily wage jobs till the part time job is well established.
- h) Junglescapes has carried out a community (VFC) managed reforestation project with GE in the last 2 years. Almost 300 acres of degraded forest lands have been reforested. The activities like growing of saplings, making of water harvesting pits and planting of saplings were planted by villagers.
- i) Junglescapes started a lantana craft training workshop in Chik Yel Chetti village on 24 December 2011. I was present during the preparatory phase. There were 2-3 villagers who were keen to make bigger lantana products such as chairs. They were willing to get together and complete orders for chairs. The women were also keen to make the smaller lantana products. However when I asked them to give their names for the workshop there was hesitation even from the most vocal women. The reason for that could be their previous negative experiences and inability to leave their daily wage coolie jobs that give them steady income. This steady income is necessary for them to repay their loans.

7 Women's Self Help Group

Name of Mahila Samiti in CYC: Mahadeshwara Shantpura Maramma Mahila Samiti

| | Member Name | Number of Family Members | Occupation |
|---|---------------|--------------------------|------------|
| 1 | Chamamma | 5 | Coolie |
| 2 | Putahanumamma | 4 | Coolie |
| 3 | Sarojamma | 2 | Coolie |
| 4 | Doddamma | 2 | Coolie |

| | | | |
|----|-------------|---|-------------------|
| 5 | Mahadevamma | 9 | Farmer |
| 6 | Kamakshamma | 3 | Coolie and Farmer |
| 7 | Anita | 0 | Farmer |
| 8 | Nagamma | 0 | Farmer |
| 9 | Gangamma | 2 | Coolie and Shop |
| 10 | S. Mahadevi | 4 | Coolie |
| 11 | Saroja | 4 | Coolie |
| 12 | Bantamma | 5 | Coolie |
| 13 | Ratnamma | 1 | Coolie |
| 14 | Machamma | 5 | Coolie |
| 15 | Javanamma | 2 | Coolie |
| 16 | K. Belamma | 4 | Coolie |
| 17 | Rajeshwari | 3 | Coolie |
| 18 | M. Belamma | 4 | Coolie |
| 19 | Belamma | 1 | Coolie |
| 20 | Mahadevi | 4 | Coolie |

The samiti was started by a man named Srinivas approximately 3 years ago and has been operating since then.

Name of Bank in which the Samiti has a bank account:
Bommalapura Kaveri Bank

Names of Office Bearers:
Adhyaksha/President: Chammamma
Upa-Adhyaksha/Vice-President: Putahanumamma

Monthly Chanda:
Rs.80 per month (20 per week)

Maximum loan amount per person:
It is calculated on the savings of the people. Currently the women each have approximately Rs.2000 savings.

Purposes for which loans are given:
It can be any purpose. E.g. Sheep, cows, jewellery etc. It is simply recorded what each person needs the loan for.

Records of loans and repayments
Anita (Subbanna's daughter) used to manage the register where the details are recorded. Since she has left, Ravi has taken over.
Excellent payment record. Every loan taken has been returned back on time.

Loans taken from the bank
They have taken 3 loans and the first time they took Rs.10,000, second time Rs.50,000, and third time Rs.1,20,000. They have already paid back the first two and are in the process of paying back the last one.

Village Development Committee (VDC)

The VDC has given one lakh rupees to the samiti. Out of that Rs.50,000 has been given to the MS as loan at 2% interest. 1% goes back to the Samiti and 1% goes to VDC.

Interest in making the Samiti more active:

Yes, but only to do something that they have skills to do. There is hesitation to start or learn something totally new. If the income from the activity is not regular, they cannot eat, so it should be something that gives them timely income.

There is also a Mahila Samiti in Guddekere but the only information I have about it is that it has been inactive since the last 8 months and Shivamma is a one of its leaders.

8 Other Relevant Information

- a) The older generation feels that the lack of education is a big obstacle to them for certain matters such as filling out paperwork regarding government issues. This might have created an inferiority complex within them.
- b) CYC it felt as though the men were absent in the evenings. And there is a general sense of women running the household alone. Drinking seems to be a problem among men thus increasing the family responsibilities on women.
- c) Even though the general motivation may not seem too high, there are definitely people such as Satish, Siddamma, Gangamma from CYC who are motivated to trying new things. Gangamma is an example of an entrepreneur in the village. On encouragement from Anita's husband, Gangamma started a small shop in the village for necessary items.
- d) Language usage has more poetic words than in normal conversational Kannada for talking about the forest and nature. The way they refer to the elements of the forest shows respect and reverence for it. Their language portrays their attitude of respect, wonderment, and care for the forest.

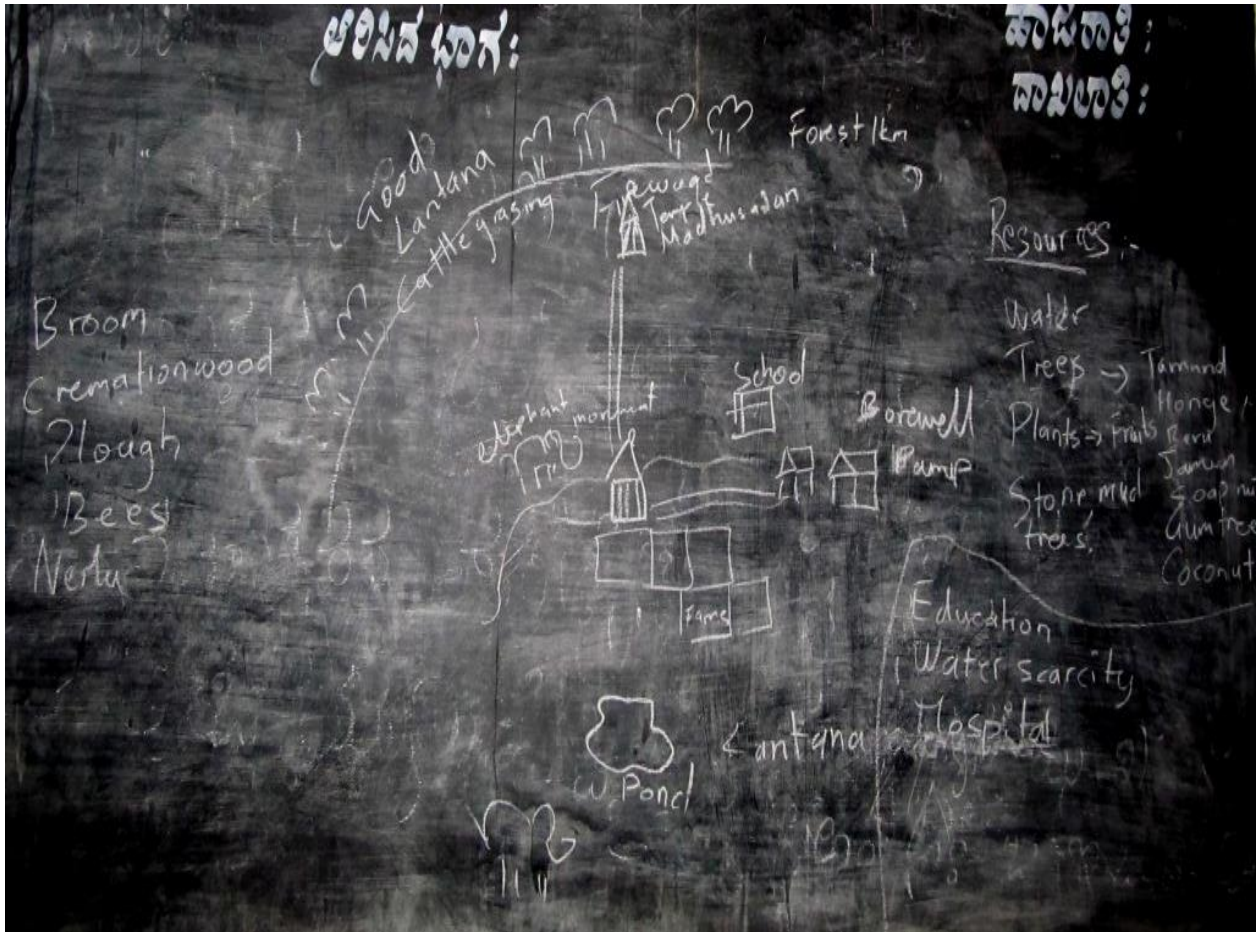
9 Village Mapping

Discussion in Groups about the Problems and Needs of the Village:

- a. Unreliable and irregular electricity supply
- b. Bachalli for doctor visit or ration supply. Costs Rs.300 per visit
- c. Some houses don't have water supply near by
- d. Lack of money: no money when there is no work
- e. Lack of access to buses

Mapping: The following items were mapped. Please see the photograph of the map below.

- Village, Water bodies, Forest boundaries, Farms, Road, Mountains, Elephant movement zones, Grazing and firewood, Lantana density, Useful trees, plants, rocks, etc.
- Since they did not know how to read or write, I drew the map for them as per their descriptions. However ideally they should also draw the map themselves.



Discussion about the map/resources and limitations/ideal village

Resources:

- a. Water
- b. Forest Trees (Tamarind, Honge, Bevu, Jamun, Soapnut, some kind of gum tree, Coconut etc.)
- c. Forest Certain types of plants
- d. Forest Stone or mud or trees required for building houses
- e. Forest Everything is useful e.g making brooms, wood for cremation, making the plough, bees, etc.
- f. Forest for cattle grazing and firewood

Limitations:

- a. Limited Education
- b. Water scarcity
- c. No Hospital
- d. Lack of Money

Discussion:

- a) When asked to articulate their biggest problem it was unanimously money or having to work for money. Almost each household has about 3 to 4 thousand rupees loans and a couple of people have loans as high as Rs. 10,000. The money earned (Rs.100 a day for coolie work) goes in repaying the loans and household expenses and so whatever they earn is not enough for repayment and living. So there is a vicious cycle involving taking loans to repay previous ones.

- b) The two places they go to work are either Subbanna's farm or another landlord in Bommalapura.
- c) They feel that they cannot survive without money since they do not have other things here except tamarind, and smaller fruit.
- d) In their ideal village, the condition of the forest would be good, people would get income from land, and that would bring them money, elephants will be scared away with firecrackers given by forest department, they would make Lantana products as well.

3. Recommendations and Feedback for Future Work

- a) Continuous and sustained connection is essential to be established with the village community. I recommend that a married couple, or one person be living in the village for at least one year to integrate with the community.
- b) People may not be able to pursue full-time alternate livelihoods since they need their daily wages from current farm labour and also they seem to be indebted to some of the land lords. Hence this needs to be kept in mind while designing projects. It may be good to design products that people can pursue on a part time basis, or during lean agriculture months.
- c) Some of the people in the villages seem to be self-motivated and keen to pursue new alternate livelihoods. Junglescapes can work with these people to start with to demonstrate the benefits and later the others may also adopt these alternatives.
- d) Persisting with projects and sustaining them for 1 or 2 years is important. When projects are not sustained villagers tend to become sceptical.
- e) More active participation required by several Junglescapes team members, as the involvement is limited to a few members at present. Team work building, and community nurturing for members is extremely important. This will improve the effectiveness and create a sense of ownership within the members, and also bring diverse skills to help the projects.

Annexure

Stories from the Forest: Stories narrated by the forest dwellers

The Park's Past

You can see the knowledge of the past in his eyes as he speaks of the changes in the forest. He sits in his chair, his bare legs showing the strength of the years of hard work, and then he begins to narrate the story of the Bandipur Park. "25 years the forest department used to issue a pass that cost Rs.5 for people to drive their truck inside and collect one truck load of dry and dead timber. This pass was only for dead and dry wood however several people starting stealing timber by cutting off live trees. The forest officials would be given bribes and people from Gundlupet, Bangalore, and Kerala would come and steal timber. Each truck load of timber would weigh between 900 to 1000kgs and would be sold for Rs.100 per load in Mysore. There was a time when in a day 200 loads of wood would be allowed to leave the national park. Apart from logging there was also a process performed of burning wood to produce a type of coal. 10 huge trees would be burnt to produce one pile of charcoal. A businessman in Bangalore had employed labourers from Tamil Nadu for this work. Often people from the Soliga tribe used to be hired to collect wood and kill animals due to their knowledge of the jungle. Extensive part of the forest was lost during this time and all this has destroyed the forest. All this logging, burning, and hunting finally stopped since the last 4 years when the Tiger reserve was put in place. The fine for cutting one tree is Rs.25,000 and we do not dare to enter the forest to cut trees or kill animals. We have no interest in cutting or killing because we want the forest to be healthy. That is the only way we can survive."

Who does the destruction of the forest really affect and who are the people who destroy it? His last statement gave me the answer; "When the forest was dense it used to rain for days together. Now it rains very little and we all want the forest to grow back."

The Soligas: Criminals or Slaves?

The Soligas knew the forest like the back of their palm. They were excellent hunters and marksmen. Their strength and agility within the forest combined with their knowledge of it made them desirable to loggers. But not only were they desired by loggers, they were also then employed by the forest department to catch the timber thieves. Many of the timber thieves were employed from Kerala. It used to take the Kerala loggers 15 days to cut the trees and take them. The Soligas travelled only at night and knew when to attack the thieves. However these were brutal days. They (Soligas) would hide and then shoot the thieves and then steal their groceries. The Kerala people would put their valuables in a cloth and tie it around their waist. They would only take it off during meals or while taking a bath. The Soligas would wait for these moments and shoot at one person so all the others would flee without taking their valuables. So they are known to have killed several people.

So what do the villagers think now? One man said, "Even though the loggers were wrong to take the trees, taking someone's life is not right. You can put them in jail. The forest department have taken away all the firearms from the Soligas but they are still excellent marksmen. It is never right to take a life, not even your own. Okay now whatever they have done is done. Now they have to tread the path of goodness."

Walking with the Elephants

"When I came here (to Chik Yel Chetti) 45 years ago I was unafraid and free. I would grow food and at that time the elephant presence was much less. It has only recently increased so much. During the Ugadi festival and monsoons, the elephant movement is quite less. Before when I used to roam the forests I did not worry at all about wild animals. They

would do nothing to me. I would make noise and they would walk away. It was the same with elephants. Only if you were to be in the middle of their herd would they attack you. The elephants were never feared before because they found food in the Bandipur forest itself. The forest size has decreased and so the elephants are making their way into our fields. However there were never so many elephants that came here in the past. The elephants are coming more to this side due to the lack of grass in the forest. They are now growing used to the taste of crops such as millet and jowar. The forest has been destroyed in the past, but it is very important to have a healthy forest. These elephants are a part of our lives. They are a reality that we have to deal with and there is no hatred within us for them.”

Forest Wisdom

I was intrigued by his long flowing beard and his bent back as he slowly made his way around the temple with his walking stick. I could see within him the fading strength of his hard working younger days. I wondered what stories and wisdom lived within him. Here are his words;

“I used to climb the hill near Lokkere every Monday to go the cave on top. A sage lived there. I would go alone and often at night. There used to be elephants, tigers, bisons, deer, and many other wild life living in the forest. But I was not afraid of anything. The forest creatures never did anything to me even though I often fell asleep up there. When I used to take flowers to offer to god and walk up, if there were any animals they would see me and go away. My path would be completely clear.

Why be afraid of the forest? The forest is where so many animals are living and that means that we can also live in it. It has everything we need and everything has its own place. The biggest change that I have seen in my life is that people do not live in the forest anymore. Humans should learn to live in the forest. It gives so much. When Rama, Laxman, and Sita were sent into the forest who is it that took care of them? There were no relatives or friends and so it was the forest that took care of them, fed them, and protected them.

If the forest grows there is so much benefit to everyone and so it is important for the forest to be well. Conservation of the forest is essential. People have forgotten how to live in the forest, the old way of life is gone, and the wisdom has vanished.”

Leaving the Land - “Bittu hogu anta maatra helbedi”

The reactions to the Bandipur forest boundary extension draft were identical in every person I talked to. “Do not ask us to leave. I am old. I have built my life here. I will not survive in the city. If I need chillies or *kadipatta* I can just pluck it from the plants and trees I grow. In the cities I will have to buy everything. Here the villagers will help me in times of trouble, but in the cities I will be asked to go to hell. How can I live in a city? Even though the people around me are not from my community, they are always there for me. How can I leave them? We are ready to compromise on everything as long as we are not asked to leave. We are people of the forest and we are willing to go back and live there. But we have been pushed into living the life of earning everyday wages. If you send us to the forest we will not leave. If you want us to live here and continue the everyday wage life doing agriculture, we will stay here. You can fence the land, we won’t take cattle into the forest or even step into it, but bittu hogu ataa maatraa helbedi (don’t ask us to leave).”

The Traditional Past: Medicine Lady

“About five generations of mine have been making this medicine that cures a disease that starts in the feet. This knowledge was passed to my mother by her father and then from my mother to me. There is no other cure for this disease except this medicine and so people

come from far away to buy it. The medicine is mostly made in my mother's and her sisters' houses in Angla. A quarter bottle costs Rs.1000. This is the only medicine we know how to make and we do not remember how my family found it or started making it. We recently sold Rs.50 worth of the medicine which allowed us to be able to get some food to eat.

This medicine is made from the tree called Junjale. The bark and trunk of the tree wood is made into small pieces and put into a huge pot. This pot is then placed on top of another pot that is buried in the ground. There wood is rich in oil and so when the pot with the wood is then heated, it causes the oil from the wood to drip down into the bottom pot. This process of giving heat is a continuous process for three days. The dripping oil is highly flammable and that is why the pot is put underground to avoid fires that may start due to sparks. The burnt wood becomes into charcoal which is also very useful for ironing.”