

“Ubaranni Haada & the Story of Change”

One fine morning, we called some of the likeminded organisations, individuals, citizens and govt institutions for a stakeholder consultation workshop. It was only the expected faces who finally turned out to discuss the issues pertaining to the Kotagiri town and its surroundings. There were less than 10 members from different interest groups who made time out of all their busy chores to come and discuss about the burning issues in the town.

Initially to start of the discussion, we made a presentation on some of our findings from our earlier and freshly done studies in and around the Kotagiri region. Our focus was more on Water conservation but this time considering the need of equity of water for Human and Wildlife. The mapping in the Kotagiri town panchayat revealed that there were close to 50 water sources used by the urban local body to supply water to the town residents and villages. We later realised that most of these sources were tapping the springs and wetlands either through a spring box, check dam or an open well.

But not to mention, the locals always thought of the Eelada dam as the only source of drinking water to the town, which is far away from the town and on the way to Kodanad near a small village called Kathukatti/ Battagorai. It was necessary to highlight the situation of Eelada dam which has now gone bone dry due to excessive extraction of ground water for various uses. The locals cried that the new resorts in the region are extracting more water that the community is not able to find enough water for agriculture. We identified one small patch of land which still had some characteristics of a wetland. We discussed about this to the locals about conserving at least the bare minimum left to keep the flow in the stream perennial. One week later when we visited the area, we saw that the only patch left (head wetland) was cleared of wetland grasses and filled with mud and ready for agriculture. The owner of the land leased the land for a short term and so the wetland is now an agriculture plot.

Oh no let's not worry about it, the Hallakkarai drinking water scheme is underway and will provide enough water to the town came a voice. The Hallakkarai scheme is executed with a budget of 10 crores and is bringing water from the stream which is closer to the Coonoor town than to the Kotagiri town. The project aims at bringing water through 4 or 5 levels of pumping which will finally be stored in the newly built, massive water tank sitting in the Thangamalai hills just below the NPA polytechnic. **_____ find out the total capacity of the tank.**

Finally when we all decided that we will choose one place and address the issues around it and work along with Community, NGO's, Citizens groups, Decision makers at different level. We chose the “Ubari Haada” a wetland which is today called the Rifle Range. The place was used by the British to train their gun men to practice Rifles shooting. The legend has it that this was once a lake, and the residents around have said that it has always been a marshy/swampy land with more water than now. The residents also said that the stream channel was bigger and the flow was high earlier.

An initial sharing of information was done from the previous studies that Keystone Foundation has done. We shared some technical aspects about why and how the wetland was studied. Then came the statistics from our study, the immediate threats to the wetland and water, peoples' perceptions, wildlife movement and dependency on the wetland, local panchayats stake and interest, issues with unsafe waste disposal etc.,

Name	Area (acres)
Built-up	28.93
Tea	55.28
Tree cover	8.59
Wetland	6.99
Miscellaneous	8.21
Total	108

The above table shows the different land use classification in the wetland's catchment area. It was important to talk about the catchment because the wetland receives a major part of its water from its catchment areas. To demystify this technical knowledge, we used the simple terms such as Recharge areas and Discharge areas. Recharge areas are where the rain water percolates into the underground and recharges your Aquifer. Discharge areas are where the ground water finds an opening to come out into the ground, in other words you can call it an exposed aquifer. This is common in case of springs and wetlands. The springs have one point entry into the ground, whereas in wetlands there are multiple points from which the water emerges and flows on the surface. The aquifer in the wetland is called a Perched Aquifer

The soil in a wetland is black in colour and clayey, _____ write a few line about the technical part of it.

There are more interesting things to discuss now, the wetlands have a tight cultural significance with the Indigenous communities of the Nilgiris. The Todas live in upper grassland areas with vast grassland and shola complex followed by huge wetlands in the valley. These wetlands were important for their life motif the rightly called Toda Buffaloes. The wetland grass and soil protects these water buffaloes from foot and mouth disease says the Todas. The Kotas who are artisan community here also are seen living in the upper plateau and use the wetland clay soil for traditional mud pot making. The Badagas who were once agriculturalists in the upper plateau have set up their villages in the shoulder of the mountain with spring water flowing down for their drinking water needs and the wetlands were in the foot of the village used for other purposes.

All of this was shared with the group present so that we understand the importance of a wetland not just ecologically but also socio-culturally. We wanted one person to take the initiative to set up a larger meeting with the community sitting in and around the Kotagiri town to reach out to more people and more areas. Raju master, a retired government teacher from Keirbetta village representing the Longwood Shola watchdog committee agreed on calling a meeting in the first week of June to talk about this to the general public and villages around.

In less than a day, we heard from him saying that the meeting will be held in Nakkubetta hall in the heart of Kotagiri town in Ramchand on the 3rd of June. In no time, he had printed a few invitations and has started inviting all the people he knew from the region. We shared the work of inviting people, we circulated a copy of the invitation on all social media platforms and also personally invited more than a hundred individuals who we know and met in their village, in the town, a tea shop and every other random place that you can think of.

On the day of the workshop/meeting, we went to the Nakkubetta hall which was used by a local resident to dry their clothes. A few staffs and volunteers from Keystone Foundation brought some posters, information brochures on the work and relevant to the event. These material were put to display around the room and by noon the meeting hall was ready with chairs arranged, clothes put up for drying was removed, we ran around to find a mic and a speaker, the Nakkubetta Tv was there to record the programme and discussion, and everything was ready.

With hundreds of invitations given to people, we expected at least a half of them to come to the meeting. The front rows as usual was occupied by the elderly men, the women taking the back seats continued, empty chairs everywhere and we were panicking of how this event will go. Suddenly there were more than 25 people present at the meeting and we had a good discussion about the water bodies in the Nilgiris and an immediate plan of action to avoid a dry and thirsty district.

The Kotagiri Citizens Collective took the initiative to interact with the local residents of Kalpana Cottage, Mullai Nagar and Rifle Range to talk about the issue of Waste disposal. The wetland was thrashed with all kinds of waste you name it. The first visit after our discussion left all of us speechless with the amount of filth in and around the waste bin. The initial idea was to do a clean up along with the local residents, but then we realised we were nowhere close to even cleaning a bit of waste accumulation in a day. We met the local counsellor/ward member who was called by the people, he came in and promised to get the waste removed by the panchayat.

The local residents mostly complained about how the Sanitary workers and waste collectors do not come to their area or to their houses to collect the waste. More complains about the people mixing up the waste only because there was no collection, the blame game went on and on. No one in the group wanted to agree that they were also part of the problem, instead they all started defending their action of dumping in the open and water body is right. The women had concerns about how the wild boar would attack them when they were carrying the waste to the bin, the women had to throw the waste and run for safety. This was another reason why the waste was seen scattered and thrown all over the place. So with an unfinished job and heavy heart the entire group of KCC and KF returned back.

The area was cleaned of all the waste the next day, it was surprising to see that the grasses finally looking green and no colourful patches of plastics thrown all around. This was the beginning of the transformation, a caterpillar turning into a colourful butterfly. The Kotagiri Citizens collective went house by house in the Kalpana cottage area and distributed Kokki and spoke about the importance of segregating plastic waste from their degradable wastes. Kokki is a hook developed by one of the locals from Ooty, a long thread is put into the hook and the plastics are added into the needle which can be hung either inside or outside the house. The experts who have been using this, mostly from the KCC advised the community the pros and cons of this system. The milk and oil packets need to be washed before they go into the Kokki to avoid pungent smells and how a secluded place for this might keep the plastic in one place and will bring in a huge change in the immediate environment around them.

This process continued day in and day out. The KCC group has now covered many houses in the locality and the people have promised to try segregating. Now that one part of the problem is addressed, the people were worried about the disposal of the wet and organic waste that they generate. A few individuals said that there was a small pit dug to dump our kitchen and other

organic wastes, but that pit was filled with all types of wastes which attracted a lot of wildlife and has been closed after that. Now that was alarming, we asked where that pit was dug, a group of women walked us close to the water channel choked by the waste dumped from the neighbourhood. The pit was dug in the wetland and on the channel where the stream was flowing. That was not the right place for a compost pit, we now know why that didn't work. Disheartened by the scene, the group went back to discussion on what can be done about it.

A clean up drive was planned, but this time we thought we will use traditional Music and dance to mobilise people in helping us clean their neighbourhood and the stream channel choking of plastics. Just when the monsoon has set foot in the Nilgiris, we had organised for a clean-up drive in the wetland. It was cloudy and it had rained the previous day, we were hopeless and had our fingers crossed. By 3 o'clock in the noon, the sun was still hiding but the volunteers did not. There were close to 15 people who gathered and even more surprisingly we had 3 volunteers who drove all the way from Ooty just to help us clean the mess. It was not easy to mobilise the community for a clean-up event, the people always stood outside their houses and saw us picking waste.

But this time we wanted to change that, we invited the newly formed Irula Music group from the Aracode region. There were more than 10 from the music group who came for the event, young men and women who have just initiated a Music school in their village and have been learning and at the same time making traditional musical instruments with locally available material. The music group was heating their drums and some practicing their "Kogel" before they're ready as a group. This was the beginning, a few children who were playing cricket had dropped their bats and balls to gather around these young tribal musicians. The music group is now ready and have started playing the Irula music.

The people are now peeping out of their windows, houses, terraces, compounds to see this new music that they have never heard before. They not only see the music group playing there but the volunteers picking up trash from the wetland. It took them a few minutes to realise that this group here to bring a change and are not leaving (or leaving them) empty handed. Initially they were reluctant, but then it started with a few women who walked in from different directions and started picking up plastics lying around. This act gained momentum, in no time we saw that there were a large group of women who are with us and picking up waste and starting a conversation. Now there's no turning back, we decided to talk to people about all the issues associated with pollution of their natural environment, water, wildlife and most importantly their own health.

Kumar anna brought a sickle and some tools to pull the innumerable plastics that were stuck in the water with grasses and roots grown over it and tangled. A few chips packets, a few detergent packets, plastic and glass bottles of different brands, shapes and sizes started coming out. While one was trying to pull these out of the pit and water, there were others removing them and filling them into transportable sacks. There comes another round of shock, we pulled out a few mini sacks which were buried in the slush closer to the dry patch to only find out that they were filled with tens and hundreds of Sanitary napkins. Every second bag that we pulled out now was filled with napkins, the boy pulling these out were embarrassed and at the same time Arthi akka was embarrassed at the scene she had brought her two kids and they had to witness this. We had a mixed group and we asked the children to move away from this place, we surely wanted the children to learn from this

but at the same time we were worried that none of us had a mask to cover us from the bad smell that came out of that pit.

By now a lot of women have started collecting the plastics lying everywhere and have gathered around us. A few women from our group took the initiative to talk to the women about the issue of disposing sanitary napkins in the water body. The need for awareness building among the women in the locality was felt and that is something we will do in the coming months along with women and adolescent girls.

Jamaapandhi was organised by the Kotagiri panchayat to address grievances from the public. We managed to meet to the Sub collector and submit a petition on the need to restore the wetland. We got a call from Raju master saying that the Sub Collector Mr. Ranjeet Singh was willing to visit the wetland. Representatives from Keystone, KCC, Longwood shola watchdog committee rushed to the spot to take the sub collector around and explain the situation. We explained to him the importance of a wetland and how the district administration could support this initiative. He agreed on the need for conserving water bodies and promised to help set up a meeting with the Collector.

The very next week, the District Collector Mrs. J Innocent Divya visited Kotagiri to initiate the “Sweep Blue Mountains” initiative. We all participated in the event to appreciate the effort of the District Administration in keeping our environment clean. We used this opportunity to invite the Collector to visit the Rifle Range wetland which was in the news recently due to our concerted efforts. The Collector agreed and we were there with the representatives of Keystone Foundation, KCC and Longwood shola watchdog committee. The collector checked on the land documents from the local surveyors and asked our plan of action for the wetland.

The idea of creating a Wetland park was highlighted by Keystone and how that can be done creatively was explained. The Collector was interested and was concerned about the funds that will be needed to get it implemented. The proposal submitted by Keystone to the Collector months ago was reminded, and she was convinced of the idea and with the support from District Administration and ULB the idea can be implemented.