# Conserving Medicinal Species
## Securing a Healthy Future

Ecosystems and Livelihoods Group, Asia

# Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge in the Nilgiri Hills of India

## Kunal Sharma and Samita Vasudevan
Keystone Foundation, The Nilgiris
kunaltuk@gmail.com, kunal@keystone-foundation.org

## Introduction

Indigenous people of the Nilgiri Hill Range in Southern India have a rich heritage of traditional knowledge that has been used for centuries and is a major part of their daily lives and livelihoods. Their ethno-botanical knowledge, traditional arts and crafts and survival strategies all have been developed over centuries of adapting to local conditions. With modernisation and globalisation, there is a very real fear that these traditional systems could become lost. To address this fear, we have been carrying out a programme through which traditional (*adivasi*) knowledge is gathered, documented and disseminated.

Indigenous knowledge has two powerful advantages over outside knowledge: it has little or no cost and it is available readily (Kothari, 1995). Properly documented and used, traditional knowledge can be used, *inter alia*, for livelihood strategies and to provide health care options. This knowledge has been shared traditionally and communicated orally, by specific examples and through cultural interactions.
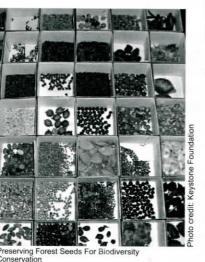
## The Setting

As the Western Ghats extend southwards, the Nilgiri Hills appear as a massive block of prehistoric rocks in the distance. The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve stretches from Nagarhole Sanctuary in the north, to the Sathyamangalam division in the east, Wynad Sanctuary in the west and Silent Valley National Park to the south. The biosphere lies at the junction of three southern states of India - Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. This range of hills supports moist, dry, evergreen and montane tropical forests. The Western Ghats, and the Nilgiris in particular, are rich repositories of biodiversity and harbours a diverse assembly of endemic faunal and floral species (Keystone, 2005).

## The People

The NBR has a large number of indigenous communities - *adivasis* - (estimated to be 21), most of them forest dwellers and hunter-gatherers (Keystone, 2005). These distinct ethnic groups have small populations and live in geographically distinct areas. Within these *adivasis* are traditional healers - *vaidyas* - who provide health care for the communities.

These *adivasis* are, predominantly, collectors of forest produce which they use to sustain their nutritional and economical needs, including shelter and medicines. As a consequence, they are dependent on forests for their survival.



Preserving Forest Seeds For Biodiversity Conservation

Photo credit: Keystone Foundation

## Documentation as tool for preserving and promoting indigenous knowledge

o Documentation of indigenous seed knowledge by building seed banks

*Adivasis* possess a vast repository of indigenous wealth with regard to forest species. Even amongst *adivasis vaidyas* and honey hunters are prime storehouses of knowledge. With the help of indigenous people, collection is ongoing of as many varieties of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) that may be of use to the people. Regular workshops are held and information gathered about the local name of the species, habit, appearance of the flower or the fruit, period of flowering, habitat, availability of the species in the locality, animals dependent on the species and finally, the uses of each species.

A seed bank has been created as a biodiversity centre, where this knowledge can be preserved. These banks serve to enhance the community's knowledge.

o Publication of a *Kurumba* medicine book in their language

This activity was initiated because of the perceived need that tribal children have little access to ancestral customs as they are taught from state government syllabi. The publication of this book attempts to provide children and adults the opportunity to read and raise questions about traditional knowledge.

The main author and illustrator of this book were from the community, as were their helpers.

A unique feature of this publication is that the script is in Tamil language but the dialect is *Kurumba*. Similar attempts are now underway to publish similar documents in different *adivasi* dialects so that people from different communities benefit from these initiatives.

o **Mapping of ancestral domains to demarcate NTFP resource use**

This exercise is currently ongoing to assess traditional domains of different sub groups of *adivasis*. Mapping also ensures that *adivasis* are not deprived of their traditional lands. In collaboration with the forest department, we have used *adivasi* knowledge and use of modern instruments such as Global Positioning Systems and Geographical Information Systems to demarcate accurately their lands and then present their cases to the Forest Department.

This effort blends traditional knowledge with modern technology.

o **Floral guide for the Nilgiris**

An initiative to document the ethno-botanical knowledge of the *adivasis* is ongoing through a publication of a field guide to the plant species found in the hills. With 200 plus colour plates, the field guide aims to be a comprehensive guide to the flora of the Nilgiris through the eyes of the *adivasi*. Combining strict scientific discipline and *adivasi* knowledge, the guide includes botanical information such as habit, habitat and description along with indigenous information such as local name, special characteristics, cultural and economic significance. The book will be published this year.

o **Traditional Practices for NTFP harvest**

*Adivasis* collect numerous NTFP species, which they use culturally and economically. Each step of harvest has evolved over several centuries and resource management is of paramount importance to them. As an activity in this project, we are documenting important parameters of resource management and assembling it in a publishable form.



குரும்பர் மத்து

குரும்பர் ஐன கோம்பேலு இப்ப மத்து பிவ...

பல்லா எம்பா பாலசுப்ரமணி

மரேதோத மத்துன
திரிகிநோடுவ மொாதலு ஹஜ்ஜெ

Photo credit: Keystone Foundation

A book on medicinal plants published in *Kurum...*

# Outcomes of the programme

Using documentation as tool for preserving and promoting indigenous knowledge is proving to be successful. Documentation has played the dual role of disseminating information externally as well as providing offering economic incentives to *adivasis* to preserve their traditional knowledge. We believe that documentation has, to some extent, reversed the loss of indigenous knowledge, in the following ways.



Collecting *Phyllanthus emblica*

Photo credit: Keystone Foundation

O *Adivasis* have found the establishment of biodiversity centres useful not only in terms of enhancing and consolidating their knowledge but also in arousing the lost sense of proprietorship that they had maintained traditionally with forests and their resources.

O The publication of the floral book is expected to serve as a field guide not only to researchers but also to the *adivasis* themselves in aiding them to enrich their knowledge through easy-to-use steps provided in the book.

O The mapping work using GIS and GPS technologies has yielded positive results. The maps have generated knowledge on depleting forestry resources and this has emboldened the communities to take remedial action by establishing nurseries of NTFP species. This, in turn, has decreased pressure on forest resources and has opened up new employment options in the form of growing commercially valuable NTFP species.

O The assessment work also highlighted the issue of minimal marketing avenues for NTFP products and the lack of interest in protecting forests. However, after setting up of value addition units and guaranteed marketing support, stability has been ensured to the people in terms of income generation.

# Literature cited

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Collecting Information through Participatory Monitoring

Photo credit: Keystone Foundation