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APPIKO MOVEMENT - SAVING FORESTS IN SOUTH INDIA

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Like the famous Chipko (hug the trees) movement of Western Himalayas, the appiko movement has made a not able contribution to saving the forests of Western Ghats. This account of the appiko movement has been written by a leading activist of this movement.

The famous Chipko Andolan (hug the trees movement) of Uttarakhand in Himalayas inspired the villagers in Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka to launch a similar movement to save their forests. In September 1983 villagers from Salkani, led by men, women and children 'hugged the trees' in Kalase forest. The local term for 'hugging' in Kannada is 'Appiko'. Appiko Andolan gave birth to a new awareness all over South India. The movement reached the hearts of people as it was launched in many parts of Karnataka.

There are valid reasons behind launching of Appiko in Uttara Kannada district. This district had forest cover extending over 81 percent of its geographical area in 1950-51. The government declared this forest district as 'backward' area and initiated the process of 'development'. Three major industries were started in this area a pulp and paper mill, a plywood factory and Power in the form of a chain of hydel dams constructed to harness the rivers of this region. These industries over exploit the forest resource and the hydel dam submerged huge forest, and agricultural area. The forest area in 1980-81 decreased to nearly 25 per cent. The local population, especially poorest groups, were uprooted for dam construction. The drastic change in forest cover affected agricultural economy of the area.

The conversion of natural mixed forests into teak and eucalyptus plantations resulted in drying of water resources affecting forest dwellers. In a nutshell, the three major P.S. - paper, plywood and power project meant for development of people have eventually resulted in a fourth 'P' - that is poverty. Thus the force which drove people to poverty is mainly the depletion of forest resources in Uttara Kannada. Appiko Movement is the people's reaction and response to Anti-development process thrust upon them.

The sahyadri range or Western Ghats in South India has its district entity as it has is the home of tropical forest ecosystem. This tropical forest constitute a potentially renewable resource but it is also one of the most fragile ecosystems which calls for special attention. In the past thirty years the on slaught of 'development' activities and an increase in population has depleted this fragile resource system to sheet exhaustion. To take the case of Kerala, which comprises of 42 per cent of entire Western Ghat area, the forest cover came down from 44 per cent in 1905 to a meagre 9 per cent in 1984. The result of such deforestation in Western Ghats has caused severe problems for whole of South Indian States. Therecurring drought in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Kerala and Tamil Nadu is a clear indication of watershed degradation. The power generation, water supply and ultimately the whole economy of South India is adversely affected. The drought in Karnataka for fifth successive year indicates the exte

of damage caused by change in the fragile ecosystem of Sahyadri. The on going 'development' policy of exploiting the resources in Western Ghats, mainly forest and mineral resource, for the benefit of elite in society has deprived poor people of their self supporting systems.

Appiko movement is attempting to save this Western Ghats, by spreading its roots all over South India. Broadly speaking, the objectives of the movement can be classified into three major areas. First Appiko is struggling to save the remaining tropical forests in Western Ghats, Secondly a modest attempt is made to restore the greenary indenuded areas. And lastly, the third area is to propagate the idea of rational utilisation to reduce the pressure on forest resource. To sum up all these three objectives; To save, to grow and rational use, which is popularly known in Kannada as Ubsu (Save), 'Belesu' (grow) 'Balasu (rational use). This is the popular slogan at Appiko Andolan.

As said earlier, the deforestation in Western Ghats has already effected hydel dams, reserviors and agriculture. The Planning Commission has recognised the 'high depletion of natural resources in Western Ghat in Seventh Plan document. The need of the hour is to save the remaining tropical forests of Western Ghats. This is the first area of priority for Appiko Movement. The area is so sensitive that the removal of the cover in Ghats leads to laterisation process, converting the land into rocky mountains. Thus a renewable resource is turned to

non-renewable resource. Once laterisation process sets in, then it takes centuries to grow trees in that land. So, before we reach such extreme point, Appiko aims at saving the, remaining forests in Western Ghats. This is achieved through organising decentralised groups at grass roots level to take direct action.

In this process Appiko uses various techniques to raise awareness among common people; foot march in interior forest village, glide shows, using folk dance-drama, street play etc. are the mode of communication to spread the message.

In last three years Appiko has achieved a fair amount of success as the state government has banned felling of green trees in some forest areas. Only dead dying and dry trees are felled to meet local requirements. Appiko has spread to four hill districts of Karnataka. There is potential of the movement spreading to save Eastern Ghats in Tamil Nadu and also spreading to Goa in future.

The second area of Appiko's work is concerned with afforestation work in an denuded land. In the previous years the activists have successfully motivated villagers to grow saplings Individual families as well as village youth clubs have taken active interest in growing de-centralised nurseries.

A all time record of 12 lakh saplings were grown by people in Sirsi area in 1984-85. No doubt, it was possible because of the co-operation of forest department who supplied plastic bags to grow saplings. In this process of developing de-centralised nursery. The activists came to know that forest department makes extra money in raising nursery. The cost paid for one saplings, grown by villager was 20 paise where as the

cost of a single saplings raised by forest department amounted to a minimum of Rs. 2.00. In addition to this, the forest department resorted to spraying fertilizers and tablets were given to saplings. The Appiko experience has brought overuse of chemical fertilizers in raising forest nursery, making it a capital intensive, money making programme. The nursery programme of village people propagated by forest department is really a means to utilise village labour at cheap rate. Appiko activists have learnt lessons from this experience and they are now growing saplings only to meet their needs not to give to forest department.

The villagers have initiated a process of regeneration in barren common land. The Youth Club has taken the responsibility and the whole village has joined hands in protecting this land from grazing, lopping and fire. The experience shows that in these areas where soil is present, the natural regeneration is the most efficient and cheapest way of bringing barren area under tree cover. In the areas where top soil is washed off, tree planting, especially indigenous fast growing species is done. The irony is that Forest Department is resorting to mechanised planting of exotic species like alaca and causurina. The department also uses huge amount of fertilizers on these exotic mono culture plantations. This activity is definitely going going to harm the soil, and eventually the tree cover in the area. There are two obvious techniques of greening, one- capital intensive, method of Forest department and the other-peoples technique of growing through regeneration a natural process for sustainable development of soil.

The third major area of activity of Appiko Movement is related to rational use of eco-sphere. This relates to introduction of alternative energy sources to reduce the pressure on forest. The activists have constructed 2000 fuel efficient Chulhas (hearths) in the area. This saves the fuelwood consumption by almost 40 per cent. The activists do not wait for government subsidy or assistance, there is spontaneous demand from common people. Even in Sirsi town and other Urban areas, these chulhas are installed in hotels, reducing firewood consumption.

The other way to reduce pressure on forest is through building gas plants. An increasing number of people are building bio-gas plants. However, Appiko is more interested in those people who are from weaker sections, who cannot afford gas plants, so the emphasis is more on chulhas.

Some people, through wrong logging practices damage the regeneration process in the forest area. Appiko is trying to change the attitude of people, so that they realise the mistake and stop wrong practices.

The thrust of Appiko Movement in carrying out above work reveals the constructive phase of peoples' movement. It is through this constructive phase that we can rebuild the depleted natural resources. In the process the sharing of resources in an egalitarian way is inbuilt, helping the forest dwellers. The attempt is to establish a harmonious relationship with nature, to redefine development so that ecological movements today becomes a basis for sustainable permanent economy in future.

(N.F.S INDIA)