

Irula tribal women seek self-sufficiency

by Susan Benn



The Irula tribal people of Tamil Nadu, South India worked traditionally as snake and rat catchers and as medicinal plant experts. With the clearance of the scrub jungle and the creation of Forest Reserves, their livelihoods have vanished.

The Irula Tribal Woman's Welfare Association tree planting scheme in the deforested barren landscape of Chingleput is a strategic development project. Led by Vijayalakshmi, Irula women (often helped by their husbands and children) collect seeds, plant young trees and document medicinal and other properties of over 400 local forest plants. A grass hut houses the seedbank run by two 50-60 year old Irula widows with generations of wisdom to hand down; they also collect folk remedies from other Irula healers and midwives so they can be recorded for future study in clinical trials.

Seedlings, of a variety of trees used for fuel, fodder, fruit and shade, are grown and distributed to NGOs, schools and the Forestry Department, which persist in planting eucalyptus trees despite the damage they cause. Nearby a well established five year old plantation clearly demonstrates how careful manage-

ment can transform wasteland and improve the lives of the people inhabiting it. Excited school girls with armloads of free seedlings spend a day's outing bringing the environmental message to all corners of the state.

Vijayalakshmi now wants to extend the plantation to include a study center and a small nursery for the children of the plantation staff. She wants to make a survey of all the local sacred groves in ancient temple grounds, the only surviving examples of ancient woodland, and collect seeds there for raising. She is trying to raise money in India for a feasibility study to determine the potential for patenting and commercial production of products from some of these "listed" plants used for healing. Most of all she wants the Centre to provide a meeting place for the over 30 thousand landless and impoverished Irula in Chingleput, where they can regain a sense of pride and dignity in their tribal heritage and their special skills, and overcome the sense of inferiority impressed on them by their higher caste neighbors.

Irulas in the north of Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, live in the "rain shadow" forested mountains surrounding the wildlife sanctuary of Madumalai. The Forestry Department encourages wild elephants, bison and tigers to flourish there while tribal families who have lived in the forest for centuries struggle to find food, water and work. Erstwhile hunter-gatherers who lived in harmony with their environment, collecting medicinal herbs, dye plants, wild fruits and other forest





Photo by Susan Benn

products, they must now adapt to new rules. These prevent them from collecting even the dung from the bush cattle they tend for rich farmers who live in the next valley. The Irulas are constantly indebted to these cattle owners, with debts being passed on from parents to children. Many of the more remote villages in the forest have little chance of survival. The people are miserable, depressed, ill, malnourished and dressed in rags. The careworn faces of 40 year old women make them look 70 or 80. Even more horrifying was the life expectancy of 48 for most women.

Aside from tree planting, another project builds on skills in caring for animals. A women's livestock cooperative has been set up and members meet regularly to discuss ways of fodder growing, fencing, animal care, management and marketing. Women in all the villages involved are encouraged to form a women's sangham or council in each village to manage these self-help projects.

Chockenalli, a village of 45 Irula families, is the inspiring "show farm" of the project's first pilot year. A well has been dug, a pump installed and a storage tank with three taps built (thanks to support from Guernsey Overseas Aid Committee). The well produces enough water for cattle, irrigation and all domestic uses except in the dry season when clothes washing

is prohibited. An airy bamboo byre with a grass roof houses 15 cross-bred Jersey or Guernsey and local cows along with 13 calves. A fodder farm produces beans, napier, lucerne and maize; each day's harvest is then fed through a cutting machine by young women who look frail but keep the heavy turnwheel going round. Electric fences keep the elephants at bay. The cows are looked after by a team of 24 women, all of whom are owners or potential owners which gives them enormous pride and the chance to plan for the future. For the first time in their lives the women can count on earning a weekly cash income - 77 rupees this year and seeing their capital assets grow. The projects under the cooperative should be completely self-sufficient in five years' time.

About the author: Susan Benn is a London-based photographer who has donated her skills and time for three years to do a series of photographs and articles on various projects sponsored by Womankind (Worldwide).

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