Creating medicinal forests a giant step to good health

By editor
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One of Asia’s largest monolithic rock structures overshadows the Savandurga forest spread over 1,000 hectares (has). The rock structure attracts a large number of trekkers but the forest enjoys its own significance as it is a repository of rare medicinal and aromatic plants.

Two decades ago, this forest had witnessed large scale desecration. The local village botanist, Muthiya who lives in Savandurga village, said: “Villagers were cutting trees indiscriminately. It was my good fortune that I got an opportunity to do a one year course at the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) in Bengaluru where I gained knowledge of over 315 medicinal plants.”

“I returned to my village and taking the assistance of local village healers and the forest staff, we began a campaign informing villagers about how to conserve and sustain ably use these forests,” said this doughty white-haired man. These efforts have borne fruit. Villagers from across eight villages have joined hands to form a Savindhi Herb Society with a turnover of 2 lakh per annum. Muthiya explains, “I’m not running the society for money. Rather, local communities are being encouraged to both meet their primary healthcare needs through this forest produce and also grow medicinal plants in their own kitchen garden.”

Over 108 Medicinal Plant Conservation Areas (MPCA) of over 200 has been created across five states, including Karnataka, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh. These are very literally forest gene banks which the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) believe will serve to conserve high quality seeds for future generations. The
program is being funded by UNDP and the environment ministry. Local communities are being encouraged to participate in this flagship program. They are being encouraged to document all the local medicinal plants and list their names out in local registers which go by the title of Community Knowledge Registers (CKR). Already, 500 CKRs are being maintained across India with UNDP support.

Mr Haridasan, joint director, FRLHT said: "The aim of this exercise is to transform these CKR into both health and biodiversity representative registers. There are 6,581 species of medicinal plants available in India. From these, 4,500 plants are being used in folk medicines."

Darshan Shankar, founder director of FRLHT, said: "We believe Green Health is the solution for ordinary people. That medicine is of value which grows in your own environment. The government spent 2.5 lakh crore on the National Rural Health Mission but how much of that money actually reached the common man. We are talking about strengthening community knowledge by growing plants including giloe, brahmi, tulsi and kirayat in an individual's backyards as a first step to maintain good health."

Shankar pointed out that medical practitioners often question the basis of this philosophy, used as they are, to dispensing allopathic drugs at the drop of a hat. He cites the example of the plant brahmi (bacopa monnieri) which ayurveda has documented in one of its many formulations which helps in reviving memory. "These ayurvedic formulations written over 3,000 years ago are based on a very sophisticated system of collating evidences whereby an attempt is made to set the entire body mechanism right," said Shankar.

He continued, "Dr Shoma Chatterjee, a nuero-biologist, from the National Centre for Biological Sciences has spent over 1 crore and three years in research to also show that brahmi gritham helps to revive memory by actually demonstrating molecular and behavioural changes in the brain. The claims made by ayurveda are being successfully quantified by modern medice."

Dr Srinivas Iyer of the UNDP believes the significance of the MPCA is that it will help conserve India’s vast bio-diversity resources. “In the project states, we are working closely with both the forest department and the state biodiversity boards to help in mapping biodiversity," he explained.

“Funds from the Global Environment Facility are supporting three states. India presently has 80 globally significant plants but unfortunately many of these fall under the critically endangered list,” Iyer added.

The area of specialisation of research scientist Ashwani Godbole at the FRLHT is to combine ayurveda and modern science. “Millions of Indian women suffer from anaemia and the existing dispensation believes giving iron tablets will help effect a cure. Ayurveda, however, prescribes 10 herbs to cure anaemia. The first step is for the patient to get dewormed. Next, the individual’s metabolism is set right with amla and only then do we start giving supplements with iron inputs,” said Godbole.

The proof of the pudding is in its eating. A primary health centre run by the Karuna Trust at Sugganahalli village uses a combination of ayurveda and allopathic medicines. Rangamma, the local community health worker, is convinced that villagers prefer traditional medicines as these have no side effects. Taking us through a quick tour of the medicinal garden growing adjacent to the PHC, Rangamma said in her rapid fire manner: “Bhu amla is useful in jaundice. Giloe and ashgandh help increase body immunity. Ghi kunwar provides relief in painful menstruation. Tulsi, neem leaves and the rind of anar provide remedy for worms while drum stick leaves and dry ginger and sesame are good for indigestion.”

She leads us inside the centre. “Decoctions are prepared in the PHC itself by using the leaf pulp or the shoots of plants. We also teach our patients how to prepare these procedures,” Rangamma said.

Rising rural indebtedness has been closely linked to health disorders. Growing medicinal
plants in one’s backyard is a sure fire way to better health.


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