

India Shining, this time for real

An ecological project is radically changing India's landscape of rural poverty

PALE YELLOW mahua flowers and their strong intoxicating scent — a common sight and smell if you travel through Nuapada and Bargarh districts in western Orissa around this time. Along the highway, tribal families sit around mahua trees and collect its flowers, reminding us that any battle plan against poverty in these extremely poor areas has to be built around the people's reliance on the region's natural resource base. Increasingly, this base is being threatened by climatic changes — marked by variable weather, changes in rainfall regime, temperature, and increased frequency and severity of natural disasters. Therefore, its protection and regeneration must be our top priority if we are serious about poverty reduction. The 2007-08 *UN Human Development Report* focuses on the link that exists between climate change and its impact on the poor: "India, especially, the poorest, are very vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, mainly because the nation's economy is closely tied to natural resources." It adds:

"Assisting the poorest communities to increase their income options will be critical in helping many to adapt".

In Orissa (a state that is the ground zero of many a battle between communities and companies over the control of climate-sensitive resources), a fight has been launched for the regeneration of land and water and improving the livelihood opportunities of the poor. An exhaustive watershed development plan is at the centre of this approach. The Indian government and Britain's Department of International Development (DFID) have sponsored this plan and it is being implemented by the Orissa Watershed Development Mission (OWDM). The Mission's projects target women, tribal and caste groups and its livelihood programmes assess what is needed to strengthen the response of the communities to the mounting impacts of climate change.

Technically speaking, a watershed is an area from which rainwater run-off flows into a single stream. It is around this area that soil and water conservation structures (recharge pits, wells, ponds and bunds) are built and water is harvested where it falls. This harvested water helps in recharging aquifers, leading to better green cover and productivity of farmlands. And, as water becomes the driver for change, other things follow — income generation improves, distress migration drops and education and health become the new talking points. In other words, it is an integrated programme that not only looks at ecological treatment of a particular area but also at improving the human development indices of the villages that fall in that zone.

"Ecological treatment of parched landscapes can play a major role in building a community's capacity to cope with disasters and climate change. Despite a good history of rainfall, this region is still drought-prone. Watershed management can revive old water-harvesting traditions and help communities fight drought and climate change," says Ranjan K. Panda, Convenor,

Water Initiatives Orissa.

What have been the positives of this programme in Nuapada and Bargarh? For starters, there has been a drop in people migrating out of this area. An earlier research conducted by DFID showed that this was a high migration area with mostly Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes moving out in search of jobs.

My first stop was at the modest home of Tunu Sabar at Semelpali village in the Larki watershed area of Nuapada. Five years ago, his life was divided into two parts: growing paddy in his two-acre patch of land and then moving to Karimnagar in Andhra Pradesh to work in the brick kilns. His wife and children would also accompany him. "Most of us went to Hyderabad or even even Surat to work as labourers. We would get Rs 5,000-Rs 8,000 for six months. From this, the sardar would deduct health and food expenses. We were left with very little. But there was no option because there was no work available here after the cropping season,"

he says. Moving back and forth meant that his children had no access to school and health facilities and, worse, they were getting sucked into an inter-generational poverty cycle.

The wheel started turning when Sabar received help from the OWDM's programme. Sabar was taught the technique of cultivating cash crops like sunflower and vegetables. A new onion storage plant helped him hold on to his crop and sell it as and when the prices improved. Today, he has stopped

his seasonal flight. He is building a new house and his children are in school. He has a motorbike and a telephone.

The other success story has been the involvement of women. "Women form the backbone of this movement and at many places they are heading the watershed committees. Many have started or joined self-help groups, moving towards economic self-sufficiency," says G.B. Reddy, Director, Watershed Mission.

At Aambahal watershed, Bargarh, I met Kamalini Pattanaik. A matriculate, she heads the watershed panel. She has started eight self-help groups, appointed new teachers for primary students, started vet camps and an anti-alcohol programme. "There has been a 50-60 per cent drop in migration thanks to improved farming and other allied income-generation activities. People have found a new reason to stay back," she says.

The future looks bright for these areas. But there are challenges: integrating the livelihood schemes with other government-run schemes, integrating with the market (the OWDM is in talks with private companies for establishing a cold chain for agricultural products) and, most important, keeping the tempo going. The best practices of this movement need to be replicated in other parts of the country. Otherwise, these areas will just be small islands of prosperity, a kind of rural special economic zones.



HOPE FLOATS: Villagers in Nuapada