

Project Update: December 2010

Exposure visit of villagers from Yelahvali and Bhorgiri villages to Hiware Bazar and Baripada villages

Kalpavriksh facilitated an exposure visit for villagers from Yelahvali and Bhorgiri villages in Bhimashankar, between 24th and 26th of November 2010, to Hiware Bazar village in Ahmednagar District and Baripada village in Dhule District of Maharashtra. The objective was to give the villagers a first-hand understanding and exposure to the process of improvement in local governance due to community mobilisation and resulting into effective and equitable village development and natural resource conservation.

Subsequent to the exposure visit, in Bhorgiri village, the people who had gone for the exposure visit have decided to start some work in the village beginning small. This they have done after reflecting on whatever they saw during the exposure visit led by Bhaguji Kathe, a senior member of the villager. They have also started weekly meetings to discuss on future directions and course of action. They have decided to volunteer 2 hours every Tuesday to contribute for village development related common activities. Similar discussions have also taken place in Yelahvali village.

The sites visited during the exposure trip

Thirty villagers from both the villages were part of the group along with Pradeep and Neema of Kalpavriksh team. The situation of Hiware Bazar and Baripada are very different from each other and yet there are similarities. Hiware Bazar is a non tribal village, close to the district headquarters Ahmednagar, a large village if about 2000 population with its own panchayat. Baripada on the other had is a completely tribal village, very far from any big urban centre and part of a group gram panchayat (part of a panchayat along with five other villages) hence not too many resources from the line agencies coming directly to the village.

In both the villages however the process of good governance, village development and natural resource conservation has followed a similar trend. In both the villages a village youth went outside to study and then decided to return to the village, provided it with a vision and leadership to achieve the vision. Both the leaders became the sarpanches of their respective panchayats, both worked on the principle of village unity, transparency, collective decision making and accountability. Please follow the following links for more details about these two villages.

http://www.kalpavriksh.org/images/CCA/Directory/Maharashtra_CaseStudy_HiwareBazarAhmednagar.pdf and

http://www.kalpavriksh.org/images/CCA/Directory/Maharashtra_CaseStudy_BaripadaVgeDhule.pdf

Some reflections on reaction of the villagers

The reaction was fascinating. The travel was long and frustrating and many villagers had never traveled such long distances. There were also a few non-complaining, very tolerant but absolutely exhausted children. Villagers were initially excited about an outing (and had specially requested to include a trip to Shirdi). After a few hours long drive the group finally reached Hiware Bazar. There were initial sniggers and remarks such as “so this is a strange outing from one remote village to another!” However, once the representatives in the village spoke to the group and they saw the kind of village development activities that have been carried out, the attitudes began to change. Early next morning we set out for another long drive (for 7 hours) to reach Baripada. Chaitram Pawar, the village leader spoke with the villagers and took them around, villagers were definitely impressed by his charismatic personality and his humility. After which we all went for a walk to the forests protected by the villagers. In the evening

the youth of the village came together and we were treated to a surprise cultural programme, an amazing dance by young boys full of energy, skill and traditional and new concepts.

By this time things definitely began to make sense to the majority of people in the group. Some of the points that they reflected upon included:

1. Baripada has very little rain and a small patch of forests (mostly all teak and very valuable) yet the amount of effort that they put in its protection is impressive. They even have had physical conflicts with violators from outside. Yelahvali and Bhorgiri are lucky to have a large patch of diverse forest and natural forest...all we need is to look after it.
2. Baripada has so few resources, sources of income, and economic status is much worse than Bhorgiri and Yelahvali but they are able to make all the difference because they are united. We have everything; all we need is to unite.
3. Kalpavriksh has been saying much about village institutions and strengthening but to us it was like a teacher drawing a mango on the board, now we have seen the mango, what is left is to taste it ourselves.

There were many other points, discussions and reflections, Yelahavali villagers requested that we go to the village the following week and the village will start some direct action. Some initial ideas were:

1. Cleaning the village surrounds, and repairing walking paths and so on.
2. Pushing for the construction of village school and a community hall more actively.
3. Working towards a forest management plan.

Bhorgiri villagers were very impressed but were not as hopeful of being able to unite the entire village given the political factions in the village. However, they sought great inspiration from the words of one of the village members in Hiware Bazar, who said “ does not matter if the entire village is not with you....as long as the eight of you who are here ensure that you don’t give up, stay united and continue your efforts, when the right time comes things will change”.

The trip ended with a visit to Shirdi, this also led to a discussion on how religious tourism should be managed and what lessons could be learned from here for Bhimashankar. In the end villagers were very happy that they got any opportunity to see what they saw.