

RELIGION FOR CONSERVATION: Leveraging Religion to Support Wildlife Conservation



A.chik Baptist Dalgipa Krima (ABDK) Sabha at Dalu- Dapgre

This report is a part of the project - Wildlife Conservation Education and Awareness in the Baghmara Balpakram Landscape, South Garo Hills District, Meghalaya, India - awarded to Nova Sangma by the Rufford Small Grants Foundation."

Samrakshan Trust

Meghalaya Field Office



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Foreword

One of the strands of Samrakshan's strategy for fostering greater sensitivity towards wildlife and to encourage conservation tendencies among people has been to build upon people's religious sentiments. Towards this we have put up stalls during religious events organized in the landscape and its vicinity.

This report describes and narrates the experience during a religious convention where a stall was put up with conservation messages and a skit was performed as well.

The narrative on the religious convention is in first person form as recorded by our enthusiastic and energetic conservation educator Nova Sangma.

These activities were enabled by a grant from the Rufford Small Grants Foundation, have been pilot activities that have allowed us to test the possibility of leveraging the religious sentiments of people in order to further conservation objectives. We hope to build upon the learning from this project and further develop the theme of Religion and Conservation.

Kamal Medhi
Team Leader – Meghalaya Field Office
March 2009.

Conservation Education & Awareness Programme in ABDK Sabha at Dalu- Dapgre, during February 2009.

With the encouragement of my team and cooperation of A.chik Baptist Dalgipa Krima (ABDK) Committee members and Pastors of Dalu-Dapgre Baptist Church, I have proceeded with the preparations of a venture for putting up a stall (displaying wildlife posters and distributing handouts) and performing a skit during the ABDK Sabha (religious convention) at Dalu-Dapgre in February 2009. I have in mind two programmes, which would be simple and an effective tool for motivating the masses of community in a short period. These are:

- 1) Displaying of wildlife posters as if the birds and animals were themselves talking to people, asking them to stop harassing them through hunting, keeping them as pets, poaching, destroying their habitat, etc.
- 2) Displaying of human actions (on the stage) in the form of a skit to pass on the message through live performance of poaching.

Besides we have taken some posters printed for pasting outdoors which calls for public cooperation in conservation, handouts on wildlife conservation and Samrakshan's brochure for distributing to the general public.



Our display stall at ABDK shabha

Thus, the programme was successfully conducted in two days (7th and 8th Feb 2009) during the ABDK Sabha at Dalu-Dapgre although there were minor obstacles such as repeatedly meeting with the Youth Secretary for allotting time for performing the skit.

The experiences:

1) **Displaying of wildlife posters:**

We got the perfect spot for setting up a stall which was besides the main entrance. There was not much difficulty in displaying our posters. Everyone passing through the main entrance would look up to the stall and read the banner first and approach to read the texts written against the particular wildlife species expressing their emotional messages about their life. Everyone would give their opinion against the work of conservation and comments that we received from the visitors were:



Crowd gathered to see the posters

- a) 'So nice and it is very touching'.
- b) 'Who wrote these expressions in such evocative ways? It is very touching.
- c) 'Very good for awakening us, I like all the expressions written for the snake. I cannot believe that they must be having such emotions because I hate them'.

But very few people would sit and discuss with us about the work we do and their appreciation about the work. One schoolteacher (headmaster from Ampati) even took pictures of all the posters saying that it would help him in passing the message of environment awareness in his school. About 5 children who came up to the stall and reading all the texts and while they were reading the texts written against the picture of barking deer, one boy among them gave a

comment saying, "wow!! It is really matching their actual life which is happening everywhere. I really feel pity for them".

Some had asked us whether we will sell those posters. And some would say pointing to the picture of porcupine that long time back there was plenty in their area (Purakhasia) but now it is not possible to see even a single such animal due to killing for meat. One person from A.chik Tourism Society (ATS) from Tura was sitting with us appreciating the work and he even mentioned that he also wanted to conduct such programmes but because of some constraints he never succeeded. Some had even asked about the fact that leg of the owl (brown fish owl) when touch with the tester, it lights. Also, such owl is in demand in the foreign market.

It is my personal view that displaying of posters with such emotional expressions of wildlife attracts many people and encourages them to rethink by putting them in place of wildlife and feel the emotions that animals must be feeling. If we use this approach for reaching more people in the Garo Hills, we would be able to change the attitude of many more people. The display of such posters along with suitable messages has the advantage of directly passing the message even without explaining through lengthy speeches.

2) Performance of skit:

This is the most effective tool that I have experienced in order to influence people's mind and ignite passion in their heart for wildlife conservation. Everyone who watched the skit commented, "... such programmes should have been conducted earlier then we could have saved much more of our forests and wildlife". In my view this is the most suitable tool for communicating; this is faster and more effective than writing or lectures.

I asked some boys from my locality (Bolsalgre) who wanted to come to ABDK Sabha and perform a skit. Many of these boys had earlier performed a similar skit and they responded that they would like to come. So, I told them that this time there would be the masks and full dress of wildlife. They all felt happy and they even came up to our office *performing 'Anti-Poaching' (skit) at ABDK shabha* and helped in preparing masks. I just explained to them the idea of drawing and making of masks and gave them full freedom for preparation. All of them started opening bird guidebooks, mammals guide book and even a snake book and reading through them. Some of them would discuss among themselves about the birds they have seen and wildlife which was seen in Baghmara Reserve Forest (BRF). I was observing them that there is some change in their attitude towards wildlife just by participating in such programmes. **This was one of the great achievements in changing attitude in young minds.**



In ABDK Sabha we have to repeatedly meet and get the information from the programme convenor for time allotment for the skit. There was not enough time provided to perform the skit with satisfactorily, still we tried our best to perform within the time limit which was just 7 minutes. But with confidence in the boys, we managed to perform faster and completed within exact time limit. It was a big test for us to face such a complicated situation in undertaking this unusual task.

As soon as the boys stood on the stage with their dress and masks everyone became so quiet and started listening to the script which was being read over the microphone. When the performance was over there was loud clapping from the crowd. The programme convenor also expressed his gratitude towards such a good programme which was meaningful for everyone and he called upon everyone's cooperation for conservation.

After the programme was over, I went with the boys for lunch to one of the hotel at Sabha campus. Then I received appreciations from many people saying, "It was a really nice programme and we never expected such a programme; it is necessary for everyone's awareness". Then two staff of Baghmara Krima-3 gave compliment saying, "It was the best programme ever and it is related to bible".

3) **Poster pasting outdoors & Handouts (Posters and handouts against keeping wild animals as pets and anti-hunting):**

We were pasting the posters around the Sabha campus, at hotel, tea stalls, betel nut stalls and on the trees. We used to inform the stall owners about pasting poster before pasting it on their stall wall and at a same time distributed handouts to them. As soon as they received the handout, they glanced through it and responded, 'I will read it at home sitting peacefully and share it to my family'. Some of the stall owners to asked for more handouts so that they could share with their neighbours. While pasting these I overheard one man talking to his children saying, 'See this poster and read what is written - from now onwards do not kill birds anymore'. I was relieved



by hearing such promising attitude from strangers towards conservation just *distributing handouts to visitors* after reading the text from the poster. Some of the people came up to our stall and asked for more posters saying that they would paste them in their villages.

In entire process we faced just once tough situation with police officer when we asked for permission to paste the poster at their police booth. It was a rude response from the police personnel, and I was felt overwhelmed with frustration. The police personnel said, 'it is not the place for to paste such posters. This is a police booth'. So, I responded saying, 'ok, police department do not require environment to live'. Then at last I said thank you and walked away. It was beyond my imagination that such unsupportive response will be received from educated people rather than encouragement or appreciation. Otherwise all other general people accepted with smile on their face wherever we go and show them the poster before we paste it on their stalls.

I approached the information centre stall and they all cooperated in announcing and distributing the handouts and organizational brochure. Then crowd came up to us and asking for the handouts and even the brochure. We were standing at the entrance in front of our stall and distributing the handouts whoever passes through. Some people had stopped for a while and read the posters and said, 'this is about conservation'. Some would ask what paper it is all about. But I would respond in one line saying, **"It is all about saving our own natural resources which are in the form of wildlife and to stop cruelty to them"**. Some had responded saying, 'it is true that most of our wildlife have been disappearing due to various reasons which cannot be retained in future. It is really good at least some people have initiated such good work to protect the environment."

Learnings:

We should feel free to approach anyone with good intention and should not directly start lecturing until the person is interested in learning something. We should plan to take our work even to the remotest villages. The majority showing interest in wildlife was rural rather than urban people. About 80% of people who came to the Sabha have received the message of Wildlife Conservation and Awareness. This triumph would not have been achieved if we were depressed with many obstacles we faced while we approached different people. We took those obstacles as our challenge and never felt it as a hindrance to our work. People's rudeness is just the test for us although we feel it as tough sometimes. It is very useful to conduct such programmes when there is a huge gathering for religious purposes. Therefore, I personally feel that we should take such opportunity in future to come. And if possible, we should look for more opportunities in some other gatherings also.



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