Attappady Comprehensive Tribal Development and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group Development Project

Exclusive Adivasi Women’s Collectives for Regenerating Agriculture for Food and Nutritional Security, Economic Sustainability and Self-Reliance
Attappady Comprehensive Tribal Development and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group Development Project

Exclusive Adivasi Women’s Collectives for Regenerating Agriculture for Food Security, Economic Sustainability and Self-Reliance

Background

Attappady is an east sloping sub-plateau in Kerala nestling below the southwestern corner of the Nilgiri segment of the Western Ghats. The Coimbatore plains are along its eastern flank and the Mannarkad-Palakkad plains are to its south and west. Administratively Attappady is part of the Palakkad District, Mannarkad Taluk in Kerala. It is subdivided into 6 revenue villages namely, Padavayal, Pudur, Kottathara, Agali, Sholayur and Kallamala. It has three Panchayats namely Pudur, Agali and Sholayur, all falling within the Attappady Community Development Block.

Attappady has a long inter-State border. To its north is the Nilgiri District, Udagamandalam Taluk and to its east is the Coimbatore District, Mettupalayam, Coimbatore North and South taluks.

The Nilambur Taluk of Malappuram District is along the northwest corner of Attappady beyond the Silent Valley National Park. Mannarkad town, the Taluk headquarters is 37 km west of Agali and Coimbatore city is 45 km to the east.

The geographical unit Attappady extends over approximately 750 sq.km. It is a part of the Western Ghats falling within Kerala. It is located exclusively within the catchment area of the Bhavani River and her tributaries, Siruvani and Kodungarapallam. A significantly long extent of the Western Ghat main watershed line passes through Attappady. The watershed line passing through Attappady is specifically very important from the point of view of Cauvery Basin with inter-State implications. It is equally important for the Bharathapuzha Basin which is a water deficit area in Kerala.

At the time of the formation of Kerala State, Attappady was a healthy rich land. This was hardly three generations’ life time ago. Many people with clear memories and experiences of those days are still alive in Attappady. Then ninety percent of the population was Adivasis; 10,200 people in 1951. Forest covered more than 75 percent of the land providing environmental security. Agriculture of extraordinary crop diversity, productivity and sustainability provided food security. The less than 80 Adivasi settlements scattered across the land provided social as well as cultural security. Monetary requirements were minimal and resource flow outward almost non-existent. There was no government. But this whole scenario underwent a radical change within the next half a century.
Waves of immigration first from the eastern Tamil Nadu and later from the western Kerala side resulted in the Adivasi population becoming a minority (around 35 per cent). Their self-sufficient subsistence economy, life support natural systems as well as ecologically harmonious lifestyle were destroyed in a very short time. They lost their collectively owned land and became dispossessed and disempowered. Their cultural as well as unique agricultural foundations were totally destroyed and devalued. A number of development programs from malaria eradication programs (spraying DDT) to the Kunda Soil Conservation Plan to the Integrated Tribal Development Plans and later the Japanese aided eco restoration program in the name of Attappady Hills Area Development Society (AHADS) were brought in to the area. In short, within a limited period an enormous amount of public funds were invested in Attappady for a population of less than one lakh of which hardly 35 percent constituted the tribal community. Every conceivable government programme was tried out in Attappady. In spite of it all Attappady came to represent sloth, tardy implementation of schemes, widespread corruption along with increasing marginalization of the tribal community, exclusion of tribal people from decision-making, extensive land alienation and social disintegration.

**Demographic Profile of Adivasis in Attappady**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the tribe</th>
<th>Number of families</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irula</td>
<td>7616</td>
<td>13160</td>
<td>13361</td>
<td>26521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muduga</td>
<td>1274</td>
<td>2225</td>
<td>2443</td>
<td>4668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurumba</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>1128</td>
<td>1123</td>
<td>2251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

People’s Plan Programmes, Gram Sabhas, OoruKootams, Ayalkootams, VanaSamrakshanaSamithies (VSS) and a plethora of social institutions under AHADS were all built up for inclusive participatory, just and sustainable development. Yet Attappady still retains its prime position in the media for environmental destruction, poverty, tribal right violations of every conceivable kind and so on. In addition to poverty, starvation and every sort of exploitation, malnutrition of pregnant women, infant mortality, especially death of newborn babies plague this once rich land. Perhaps the single-most important contributory factor to the child malnutrition deaths, and the cause for the overwhelming poverty of the Adivasis, which fails to be addressed to date, is the alienation and loss of most of their fertile agriculturally suitable land, total destruction of their indigenous mixed cropping system, change in diet and lifestyle, and loss of hope.
Though liquor has been banned in Attappady, men consume large amounts of spurious and lethal brew from the bar connected with TASMAC (Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation is a company owned by the Government of Tamil Nadu, which has a monopoly over wholesale and retail vending of alcoholic beverages in the State of Tamil Nadu), from the liquor shops in Mannarkad and also illicit brew being distilled rampantly in the hamlets. There are several women who are single, either deserted or widowed and have to fend for themselves. Women are the worst affected by the male consumption of alcoholism. The men die very early in life due to alcoholism and women have to look after families on their own. Women are the main providers for the family through the income earned by NREGP. The other main source of income for women is work in the Tribal Co-operative Farming Societies. The Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) by the Kudumbashree program hardly existed in the tribal areas.

It is in this context that the Attappady Comprehensive Tribal Development and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group Development Project was envisioned. This pilot project of National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Ministry Of Rural Development was initiated in Attappady in 2013.

Vision

The project aims to uplift the social and economic status of Irula, Muduga and Kurumba tribal communities of Attappady. Sustainable livelihoods like agriculture and allied activities need to be developed where the community can be self-reliant and self sufficient in food. Women’s institutions would be built up for total financial inclusion leading towards poverty alleviation and social development. Awareness generation would be enhanced on all issues for the communities to be able to access all entitlements and schemes. The institutions would enable women to access credit, engage in sustainable livelihoods, build up entrepreneurship, marketing and negotiation capacities and capacity to assert their agency in all realms from the domestic front to the various forums like the area of work, Panchayat and various departments. The social, economic and political status is to be enhanced and they should be able to assert their cultural identity as Adivasis.

The project area would ultimately be an immersion site for the community resource persons in the most vulnerable tribal communities of India. Similarly, the Community Resource Persons (CRPs) in this area can engage in the mobilization and institution building processes in other parts of the country. Modules and protocols would be developed for building the capacities of the community resource person’s and professionals for this upscaling process. The needs of the other vulnerable areas would be understood before the mobilization processes are undertaken.
Aims and expected achievements of the project are:

- **Building up of powerful and effective exclusive institutions of women from the tribal communities who should develop negotiation power, ability to critically analyze their own situation and collectively work towards social transformation**
- **Institution at the Ooru (hamlet) level and Panchayath level for tribal women to enable them to access all entitlements and schemes of each department and engage in the proactive process of preparation of tribal sub-plan.**
- **Institutions to ensure availability of nutritious food, access to health care, education, etc.**
- **Institutions should have the ability to prevent social issues like child marriage, domestic violence, trafficking and other forms of violence which affect the status of women**
- **Skill training to youth to save them from unemployment, despondency and alcoholism.**
- **Livelihoods in agriculture and micro-enterprises that would lead to economic development**
- **Funds disbursed to the community**
- **Attappady will ultimately developed as the immersion site for the community resource persons and professionals working in the extremely vulnerable tribal areas of the country.**

**The Process –**

**Formation of Local Groups and Institutions for Achieving the Above Mentioned Goals of the Project**

- **Exclusive Social Institutions for Tribal Women**
  
  Kudumbashree model of poverty alleviation was chosen as the method of building social institutions. Though this programme had reached the Attappady and despite reservation of SC/ST communities in CSD and ADS, it has been naturally under the leadership of settler community. The NHGs were in a very dismal state and the groups
had to be renewed. The Adivasis naturally felt distanced from Kudumbashree for a variety of reasons. So it was decided to have exclusive institutions for the tribal communities. Social mobilization, institutional building and capacity building in order to enable the community to access their rights and entitlements were the basic foundation of the project.

❖ Community Kitchen and Nutritional enhancement

Along with the process of building women’s collectives in the hamlets, it was decided to initiate Community Kitchens wherever the need was felt. Series of meetings were held with women from all communities at various levels to incorporate their perceptions about the necessity, feasibility and acceptability of such a program. The modality and logistics of running a food providing program were discussed in detail after getting their concurrence on the concept. Most women were of the opinion that the community kitchens should be managed by the tribal women’s Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) and women would serve food in the evening. The menu was decided as white boiled rice, ragi powder, a variety of pulses like cherupayar (green gram), muthira (horse gram) and kadala (chick pea). Women were delighted about the whole idea as it was a revival of the earlier practice of “Ooraduppu” (Hamlet Hearth) sharing food and having meals together. It was decided that children, adolescent girls, pregnant women, lactating mothers and senior citizens would benefit from community kitchen. At present, there are 192 Community Kitchens with a population of 9287 consuming the food. A special community kitchen is being managed in Tribal hospital at Kottathara for pregnant women who are anemic.

According to the Health Department’s report the weight of newborn babies have increased from one and a half kilograms to two and two and a half kilograms after an year of providing regular meals to pregnant women. Community Kitchens are being extended to provide breakfast with a variety in food items such as idli, rice gruel, green gram, beaten rice flakes (avil), and broken wheat upma. The Community Kitchens are
funded cyclically by the Department of Social Justice, Social Security Mission, Kudumbashree and the Tribal Department.

❖ **Community Kitchens to Nutritional Education Centres**

Nutritional Education Centres are being initiated in select hamlets to spread awareness regarding the basic essentials of food, nutritious food and health. The idea is to restore their indigenous collective knowledge and the rich diet of seasonally grown and most suitable diet and food habits they had till very recently. **A cadre of health and nutrition workers is being trained to help the community make correct choices regarding crops they grow and the wild edible leaves and tubers they collect, the food they cook in their traditional ways, health care and land care. This is being done in the hamlets with the full participation of elder women.** Nutrition re-education classes and specifically designed cooking lessons are also being planned. The women are guided by the principle of Food Security – Safe Food without lethal chemicals – Nutritional Security – Health Care – Self Care – Earth Care. This means connecting the micro to the macro, meaning the individual health/food/nutrition to the society as a whole and reconnecting the whole process to the health of the soil, land, water sources and ecosystems.

❖ **Poshakaharamela (Nutritional Food Festival)**

As part of spreading awareness and instilling pride in their rich agriculture and unique and diverse food items, a festival was organized where 40 hamlet level women’s groups (Oorusamithies) cooked a variety of traditional cuisine and displayed their items.
They explained the nutritional and medicinal content and qualities and customary importance of the diverse food items they exhibited. A wide variety of food items made from millets (ragi or finger millet, chaama or little millet, aricholam or sorghum), grains from bamboo seeds, many kinds of legumes and pulses like avara (lablab bean), thomara (pigenon pea), vanpayar (red cow pea gram), tubers, wild edible leaves, leaves of kantharimulaku (bird’s eye chillies), manathakkali (sunberry), chundakkai (Turkey Berry) wild tomatoes (cherry tomato), cooked in variety of ways, chutneys, ada, vada, puttu, kali, kozhukkatta etc.

This was followed by a panel discussion on nutrition, health and nutritional content of the pulses, millets, vegetables, tubers. The workshop had animators, oorusamithi leaders and traditional healers as participants. This is an endeavor to transform the community kitchens into educational nutrition centres. The workshop had presentation from the traditional healers about the value of the leaves, roots, tubers, bark, etc. Some presentations were in the form of poetry. Nutritional experts also made presentations. The education will be imparted and discussions generated in the hamlets with the help of audio visual material and in a phased manner.
Empowering From Below – Enriching the Grassroots

The First Step - Formation of Neighbourhood Groups

Sustainable socio-cultural and agricultural development cannot succeed without the full participation and collective action of the community as a whole. In order to develop the community kitchen into a real space and forum for community empowerment, social mobilization and information dissemination, newspapers were distributed in the hamlets. Mathrubhumi and Manorama, the two leading newspapers as well as ThozhilVartha and ThozhilVeedhi, two magazines that provide information on employment opportunities are being distributed in adjacent hamlets. It was also an instrument for institution building.

The very first meeting for discussing community kitchen was attended by 300 women. Community kitchens became a real empowering activity for the women because they are fully managed by women who purchase all the groceries from the Maveli store on their own, manage the store, do stock-keeping, write stock-book, fill in vouchers and formats and submit to the Project Management Unit’s office. The funds are electronically transferred to the NHG’s account.

Community kitchen and constant discussions at the community kitchen paved the way for total social mobilization of the community into Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs). The focus was on the need for institutions to achieve social equity. All the 192 hamlets were accessed and all women irrespective of their status and ability were included. Neighbourhood groups were formed of women in close proximity within the hamlets and women formed NHGs comprising of 10 to 15 women. Small NHGs comprising of 5 to 10 women were formed among primitive tribal communities, elderly, infirm and mentally ill women. Today, there are 550 NHGs of women comprising of 10 to 15 women. The NHGs adhere to the non-negotiable principles such as regular meetings, free and honest discussions on the various problems in the hamlets, especially those related to women and children, regular savings, books of accounts, internal lending and repayment. All the NHGs are registered with the Project Management Unit (PMU) and have bank accounts. A government order was issued elucidating the role, responsibility and functions of the various institutions.
The success of the institution building among Adivasi women is all the more remarkable because it broke most of the entrenched prejudices and myths about tribal women as “ignorant, incapable of saving money, keeping accounts...”. The latest data shows that there are NGHs having 10-15 members, with savings of Rs. 85,06387, internal lending to the tune of Rs. 38,05773 and repayment to the tune of Rs. 15,0867. All of them manage their books of accounts brilliantly. Majority of the groups have savings in between Rs. 10,000 to 20,000 followed by savings below Rs. 5000. Majority have taken loan below 5000 followed by those in between 10000 to 20000 and by those in between 5000 to 10000. Majority of the groups have in between 15 to 20 members and others have 10 to 15 members.

Second Step – From NHGs to Oorusabhas and PanchayatSamithies

Following the formation of NHGs, they were consolidated at the ooru or hamlet level to form the “Oorusamithi” (Hamlet Level Group) and the Oorusamithies were consolidated to form the PanchayatSamithies (Panchayat Level Group). The Oorusamithi formation takes place after all the women in a hamlet have joined NHGs.

An Oorusamithi comprises of 5 to 10 NHGs. If a hamlet has a small population and only 2 to 3 NHGs, then two adjacent hamlets come together to form the Oorusamithi. The Oorusamithi is formed through a workshop in which all members are present. The session begins with an
introduction about the significance of institutions and the process of formation of oorusamithi. Group participatory exercises and presentation about the relevance of the institutions, the perceived goals of oorusamithi and panchayath samithi would be discussed. Resource mapping and livelihoods like agriculture, cattle-rearing and non-timber forest produce would be drawn and presented. At the end of the discussions, the members would select the Executive Committee from the Presidents and Secretaries and a nominated member of each NHG.

At present **106 Oorusamithies have been formed out of which 40 are in Agali, 36 in Pudur and 30 in Sholayur.** They are being registered and have bank accounts. Start-up costs and Vulnerability Reduction Funds have been disbursed.

Panchayath Samithies were formed in all the three panchayaths, Agali, Pudur and Sholayur within a span of one year where all Oorusamithi executive members participated. It was a mass mobilization of around 500 to 600 women. The relevance of the institutions was discussed followed by group discussions and presentations and finally election of the Executive Committees of the Panchayath Samithies from the Secretaries and Presidents of the Oorusamithies. The Panchayath Samithies have opened accounts.

**The Block Samithi** is the consolidation of Panchayath Samithi at the Block level. The Executive Committee of the Block Samithi is selected from the Executive Committees of the Panchayath samithies.
Funds to the community

Corpus fund of Rs 10000 has been given to the 507 groups. Start-up- Costs of Rs 63 lakhs has been given to 63 Oorusamithies and 63 lakhs Vulnerability Reduction Fund to 63 Oorusamithies. This is based on the micro-plan and vulnerability index developed by the Oorusamithies. The Oorusamithies disburse the funds to the NHGs which are most vulnerable. VRF in Attapady is considered as a revolving fund and repaid to the Oorusamithi by the NHGs. Community Investment Fund of Rs. 75,60,000 has been given to the 3 Panchayath samithies. The fund has been transferred to the NHGs and will be returned to the Panchayath samithies. An amount of Rs 60,000 is being given to the NHGs and they are using it for the purpose of livelihood by developing business plan looking into available resources, skills and marketing facilities.

It is seen that corpus funds are being used for health and education needs. VRF is used similarly for health and education needs and livelihood needs like purchase of goats, cow and agriculture and the amount is being repaid to the Oorusamithi. The disbursement is based on micro-plan and vulnerability indicators developed by the Oorusamithies.

Community Cadres – the Backbone of the Process

The most important strategy and strength with respect to the entire project has been the selection of Animators from the tribal community and the capacity building programmes for the community cadres. The mobilization, institution building was successfully accomplished as the animators belonged to the community, spoke the same language and were well versed in the social and cultural background and needs of the community. The mobilization and institution building was accelerated as the animators understood the pulse of the community and the strategies to be adopted. Capacity building for the cadres has been a continuous process with constant reflection and review meetings where conceptual clarity about the project was achieved apart from the thematic training on agriculture, natural resource, education, health, gender, etc. There are around 120 Animators. Through the capacity building process, the Animators have been strengthened to access their rights and entitlements and strengthen the
institutions to raise their voices and assert their agency and access their rights. They support the capacity building programme in the field. All the community cadres belong to the respective tribal communities and speak the Adivasi dialect. All the thematic trainings are held for the Animators first and they in turn conduct trainings in their respective areas and function as catalysts and social change agents.

**Community Resources Persons, 62 in number** were appointed for MKSP. The CRPs are women from the community, mostly illiterate but really knowledgeable in traditional methods of agriculture and are involved in full time farming. They are proving as models by engaging in agriculture.

**Staff**

The Project Management Unit has a Mission Manager as Chief Operating Officer of the project, an Assistant Project Officer in charge, 2 Vertical Co-coordinators, one for institution building and capacity building and one for social development, 3 Young Professionals, one Consultant for MKSP and one Financial Manager, 3 Panchayath level Co-ordinators and one Accountant.

**Capacity Building**

Capacity building programs have been facilitated for NHGs, Oorusamithis and Panchayat office-bearers and members. Trainings have been held to explain the non-negotiable principles and various activities like community kitchen and health interventions. Women were trained in topics related to Oorusamithi and Panchayat Samithi formation, roles and responsibilities of these social organizations, management of corpus funds to the community and book-keeping. Women have been trained in social development and livelihood aspects. Trainings have been held with respect to natural resources and agriculture with focus on organic farming without lethal pesticides and chemical fertilizers and other agro-chemicals.

Exposure visit was undertaken to Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh, Kovel Foundation and Jattu Trust in Vishakapatnam to understand the institutions of women from
the tribal communities, the agriculture and Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) operations they have undertaken. Visits were made to Oornatikiri, Malapuram, Thrissur and Ernakulam districts. They learned about the functioning of joint liability groups, saw the exhibition of Kudumbashree products.

It was a revelation to the women to understand the potentials of marketing their invaluable produce. Kurumba women were aghast to see that products like ragi could be sold at such high prices. The confidence in organizational structure to be able to manage agriculture and marketing and undertake micro-enterprises was built up.

The number of trainings on various subjects which the Animators, CRPs, NHG, Oorusamithi and Panchayath Samithi members, farmers, mothers, adolescent groups received are numerous and comprehensive, holistic and educative. Some of the most important subjects dealt with in the training programmes are:

- Management of Funds, Book keeping, roles and responsibilities, the project rationale, main aims and objectives and also the method of implementation through exclusive Adivasi women’s collectives.
- Building resource persons to deal with health covering aspects of child, adolescent, reproductive and mental health
- Relevance of the Right to Education Act and the basic provisions of the Act from infrastructure facilities to quality of education
- Role of the mothers in monitoring the schools and hostels and focusing on universalizing enrolment, retention, quality of education, etc.
• Gender concepts, gender and poverty, vulnerability, gender and natural resources, access to and control over assets, resources, gender division of labour, socialization, stereotyping, patriarchy, violence against women, etc.
• Training by traditional healers to form producer groups under MKSP and explain the concepts and work under MKSP.
• Concepts of natural farming, importance of rejuvenating the indigenous multi cropping system, value of local cultivar diversity, seed saving, environmental and health impacts of using pesticides, chemical fertilizers, soil and water conservation and ecologically suitable land use and conservation of natural resources.
• The issue of severe malnourishment and curative measures to be undertaken by mothers of severely malnourished babies.
• Stock keeping and maintenance of stock book for community kitchen
• Masonry training for 60 days by Nirmithi Kendra
• The concept of Farmers Field Schools in select suitable agro-climatic zones of Attappady. Field work and discussions with the Animators, CRPs and Oorusamithi women.
• Child rights, lifeskills and campaign for suicide prevention using various participatory exercises and one to one interactions - 53 programmes were held with 2877 adolescents.
• Training for the CDS and ADS members and Bankers on the objectives and rationale for the comprehensive development of the tribal community and need for convergence.

Livelihood Interventions

For as long as people, especially the ecosystem people, have engaged in agriculture, farming has been possible and viable in the long run only as a collective process. Adivasis of Attappady have always worked together on land management, land preparation, seed selection and conservation, their unique multi-cropping system, labour sharing and all the rituals and functions connected with farming. The NHG women were eager to take up a kind of “collective farming” after many years since modern agriculture took their land by storm. However, most of them still retain their knowledge, seeds and desire for farming in the indigenous way.
The only difficulty was preparation of land which has been lying fallow for many years, which needed collective effort. A unique community ritual of land preparation before and after sowing seeds namely “Kambalam” was held in some of the hamlets as part of the beginning of the agricultural restoration work. There was major mobilization of the community in the festival. Women and men, young and old participated with songs and dance with accompanying musical instruments and dramatic characterization including the appearance of a “komali” (wise mendicant baffoon), ritualistic performances, clearing the fields of weeds and stones, Women were given the choice of opting to be members of producer groups in agriculture or cattle-rearing or non-timber forest produce.

Diverse cultivars of local seeds of millets like ragi (finger millet), thina (foxtail millet), chaama (little millet), ground nut and a large variety of vegetable seeds were provided as inputs to women farmers under MKSP.
Agricultural production was undertaken in all hamlets and the result has been most remarkable and encouraging. Large quantities of millets and vegetables produced thus are being regularly sold in the Thrissur Collectorate on Mondays on a weekly basis. Groundnuts have been shelled and the produce is being packed, sealed and sold in the name of ‘Malleeswara Products’. Ragi is similarly powdered and sold.

Farmers Field School

Farmers Field School is a novel concept of initiating agricultural group training activity where a long-term process of restoration and rejuvenation of agro-ecosystems and indigenous and sustainable agricultural foundations are taking place. All the ecologically and economically suitable organic/eco-friendly/natural/indigenous farming techniques from soil and water conservation and rejuvenation to Integrated Pest Management (IPM) that rely on ecologically suitable principles, and from breeding and improving indigenous cultivar seed varieties, land races and commercial varieties to saving crop wild relatives will be experimented, demonstrated, and suitable methods developed in these field schools. The expertise and local knowledge of the whole community will be brought together in these demonstration plots.

Initial discussions, training programs and field surveys to decide on the suitable hamlets, interested farmers and farmlands in the several agro-climatic and ecologically distinct zones of Attappady have been held. FFS should optimally consist of 20-25 farmers (but not limited to as anyone interested can join and contribute); the expertise is field based, initially lasting a few cropping seasons to take into the vagaries of weather and climate, water availability, wildlife depredation and so on.
Meleparappanthara & Vellakulam selected as possible sites for setting up Farmers Field Schools

Farmers should be able to compare the diverse methodologies and the results and document the whole process so that the good results and lessons learned can be emulated elsewhere in Attappady.

**NTFP Based Livelihoods**

Yet another breakthrough has been achieved in the marketing of Non Timber Forest Produce by breaking the nexus of exploitative middlemen traders. The produce is sold by Care Keralam to various Ayurveda Pharmaceuticals and NTFP collection especially that of medicinal plants has begun and the nexus of traders has been broken and now the Panchayath Samithi has begun collection and the produce is being sold to Care Kerala, a Government of India enterprise for sale to several pharmaceuticals. The payment is transferred electronically to the Panchayath Samithi and Oorusamithi. There are efforts to form micro-enterprises of value added tribal medicines and oils and various other products like coffee and pepper. A special Government Order was issued by the Chief Conservator of the Forest Department lucidly explaining the sole power and authority of the Oorukkoottam (Gathering of the people of the hamlets, all officials concerned and other stake-holders) under the Forest Rights Act permitting them the choice of their agency to collect and market forest produce.

Producer Fund has been disbursed under MKSP and the amount has been used for agriculture, cattle and goat rearing, etc. Marketing linkages have been established and the agriculture produce using organic methods is being sold at improved prices. The endeavor is to break the
nexus of traders in Attappady Black, the reputed genre of goat and capacitate the institutions to directly engage in marketing.

**Social Development**

While arguably not part of the development of agricultural and nutritional security, unless social security is assured, all the efforts at empowering women can go to waste. Addressing the severe personal, domestic, adolescent and social problems plaguing the Adivasi communities in Attappady became imperative in the main process of the work. Trainings and interventions have been made with respect to adolescent suicides, child marriages, domestic violence, alcohol distilling and sale. These interventions were made with the support of Animators and Ooru samithies. Adolescent suicides were a major area of concern. Adolescent programmes were held with the support of Social justice Department. Several programmes and workshops were held for adolescents to explain their rights and then later one to one interactions were held with a number of children and young adults.

Gender training has been facilitated for Animators where the major discussions focused on social construction of gender, natural resources and gender, poverty and gender and agriculture and gender, women and division of labour. As a follow–up on the discussions about gender, several interventions were made in the areas of domestic violence and alcoholism, dropping out of children from schools, child sexual abuse, trafficking, child marriages, alcoholism, etc.
The major social action intervention has been the strike against alcoholism organized by the Thaikulasangha (Mother’s Traditional Organization), resource agency for gender. The strike is being conducted against the TASMAC Beverages and bar in Aniakatty selling spurious and toxic brew which has led to the death of several men. This agitation has succeeded in closing the outlet giving a moral boost to the Adivasi women. A Legal Aid Centre has also been established to provide legal aid to various women subjected to domestic violence.

**Improvement of Health and Nutrition**

Health issues naturally received the foremost importance as the Project was formulated mainly to address and find solutions to the infant mortality and women’s health problems. A computerized system called Jatak was developed to continuously monitor the weight and height of the children which was measured by JPHN and read out in the mobile by NRHM. But several children weight was not being recorded. There was great resistance for the tribal
families to seek access to health care. Massive mobilization of children was undertaken from all hamlets to PHC’s and the nutritional rehabilitation centres. Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres (NRC) had been established by NRHM with the technical support of UNICEF. Interactions were undertaken in each hamlet with mothers about the importance of weighing SAM (Severe Acute Malnutritioned) and MAM (Moderate Acute Malnutritioned) children and the need for special attention for such children. A special food which was mix of ragi, rice, black gram prepared by NRC was supplied to children. It was monitored by animators with a team of anganwadi workers and JPHNs. Pregnant women who had never visited hospitals were taken to hospitals for screening. A special drive was conducted and Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY – a government run health insurance scheme) cards were distributed to all families. The Project Management Unit (PMU) functionaries are trainers for the CSAM (Centre for Sustainable Agriculture Mechanization) programme and are responsible for training the Para Professionals. The production of Energy Dense Special Food will be produced by Sholayur Panchayat Samithi and the proposal has been submitted to Social Justice Department. The unit will not only cater to 34 SAM children in Attapady but cater to children outside the State if needed.

Mental illness is increasing alarmingly in Attapady, probably due to the stress and strains of coping with poverty and domestic violence, and suicidal tendencies are common among the young and middle aged alike. Several women have been taken to Thrissur medical college for treatment with the help of Animators who accompany them.
**Educational Interventions**

Education was taken as a major area of intervention by the project. Thousand children were interviewed on their educational status and needs. It was found that most of the children studied in the hostels of residential schools both in Attapadi and in far off places in other parts of the state. The number of dropout children was very high mainly due to all sorts discrimination and abuse and delay in receiving stipends and so on. The condition of hostels, both government run Model Residential Schools (MRS) and private residential schools was abysmal. They were overcrowded with no basic facilities like bathrooms, toilets, study rooms, etc.

This study was presented before the Agei(Mothers’) Education Committee and the women presented their opinions about the study. The Agei Committee comprises of women looking after education in the Executive Committees of the Oorusamithies. They were trained in the basic tenets of Right to Education and how the mothers committee can function like the school management committee to look into the infrastructure in the school, student teacher ratio, absenteeism of students, lack of toilets and purified drinking water, lack of teachers, lack of inclusiveness leading to dropping out of children, lack of quality in education.

**Bridge School**

Stayin Camp for youngsters prior to the opening of the Bridge School

Three bridge schools were opened to integrate dropout children into mainstream education. **At present 63 children are studying in the bridge schools and residential facilities are**
provided for children to study. The teachers have completed TTC and belong to the tribal community and hence curriculum is transacted in the tribal language. The classes began in the camp mode to attract children towards learning and educational experts from various disciplines taught the children. At present they are being registered to appear for the Equivalency Exams conducted by the Literacy Mission of primary, upper primary, the 10th and 11th standards.

Special coaching for 10th Standard Students

Special coaching was initiated for the 10th standard students of Pudhur, Agali and Sholayur schools to assist them in facing the exams. The classes were provided on Saturday and Sunday by CIGI, an educational institution which works with educational attainment for the most deprived children. Residential classes were held in study holidays and Christmas vacation for 10th standard students.

Block Resource Centre and Youth Resource Centre

Yet another social enrichment and empowering initiative started is among the Adivasi youth who are not only unemployed but also despondent. Several Resource Centres to handhold them to develop personally and find meaningful livelihoods and self confidence are being developed. Youngsters who have shown leadership qualities are employed to take up this challenging work. The Block Resource Centre comprising of a Child Resource Centre, Youth Resource Centre, Gender Resource Centre and Legal Aid Centre has started functioning. Students of the Bridge School have been trained in taking up socially relevant campaigns and getting involved in the agricultural and cultural rejuvenation work in Attappady. For example a play has been developed portraying the issue of child marriage and suicide and this is being performed in all hamlets, schools and hostels.
The play “NamathuJeddu” (Our Voice) being played in the Agali Residential School

Youth Clubs are being initiated in the hamlets. One surprising offshoot of this process is the formation of Kurumba Youth Resource Centre which has decided to focus on livelihood issues and development. Public Service Commission coaching is being held for 35 young men and women with the support of the Brilliance Centre in collaboration with the Forest Department.

Skill Development

In order to solve the acute problem of unemployment among the youth in Attappady Skill Development trainings were undertaken with support of Nettore Technical Training Foundation. The major trainings were on CNC Lathe, fitting and turner in Dharwar, Bangalore and Thalassery. 90 youngsters have undergone training but the youth are finding it difficult to take up placements in cosmopolitan cities like Bangalore.

Co-operation and Convergence with Other Departments

The success and social acceptance of the Comprehensive Tribal Development Project of the NRLMS can be gauged by the generous financial and other support it has received from many government departments. In fact the sincere and capable Community Cadres built up through trainings and first hand field experiences have already become indispensible in the overall development processes in operation in Attappady. Smart Surveys and Community Based Management of Severely and Acute Malnourished children are being implemented in convergence with the UNICEF, National Health Mission and ICDS. For agriculture, the funds to purchase seeds were provided by Tribal Department. Community Kitchen is being supported by
Social justice Department, Social Security Mission and Integrated Tribal Development Project. Arts and crafts workshop was held with children with the support of Lalita Kala Academy. Adolescent programmes to build awareness to prevent suicide were conducted with the support of the Social Justice Department. The proposal submitted to Sanitation Mission to construct community toilets has been approved and the plan is being prepared for implementation. Similarly, the project for implementation of water scheme under Jalanidhi is also being undertaken.

**MIS and Social Audit**

MIS is being submitted by the Oorousmithi. As the Adivasi women in some of the Oorousamithis do not have the confidence to collate data and audit their accounts, an auditing team was developed to audit and present all data using the Management Information System for the past two years. At present the off-line data entry has been made in excel. Some of the Animators trained in the methodology of Social Audit are helping in this transparent process of ensuring accountability.

**Challenges and Way Forward**

The Attappady Comprehensive Tribal Development Project will complete three years of functioning by June, 2016. Although there were many delays, hitches and teething troubles in the first year, this unique project has obviously taken root in Attappady mainly because its growth and functioning is organic, non-intrusive and exclusively centred on Adivasi women. Sustainable agriculture and emancipation of dispossessed and disempowered indigenous communities can succeed only with the full participation and collective action of the whole community. This is exactly what was ensured in the whole process of implementing this project. One of the most important non-negotiable principles adhered to at every step is taking the women of all the hamlets into confidence, respecting their opinion, perceptions and knowledge base and slowly gaining their trust and affection.

It is elementary logic that restoration of individual body health, the collective restoration of community culture, land husbandry focusing on agriculture and the regeneration of the health of
the land for sustainability of the community all have to be centred on women. For the tribal society in Attappady what is envisaged and initiated through this program is the recreation of a woman-centred organic, ecologically suitable, socially just and economically sustainable regenerative lifestyle.

The strengths of the project are:

- Catalytic and powerful women leadership which has been built up through the Animators, CRPs and Oorusamithy members capable of accessing/demanding their rights and entitlements.
- The awareness that has been created that tackling the root cause of the ill health of the mothers and the new born babies for all time can only happen along with treating the ill health of the land, reviving their own indigenous multi-cropping system and their rich food habits and diet consisting of diverse millets, cereals, pulses, vegetables, wild edible plants, fish and small animal meat.
- The enthusiasm that has been created in at least most of the hamlets about nursing the land as a collective community activity.
- Collectives of women and youth to rebuild community identity in Attappady by getting back to the land and rejuvenating the wise and sustainable old ways of living, farming, maintaining justice and harmony.
- Assisting the educated unemployed and the so-called school and college dropouts to find meaningful livelihoods and cultural roots and individual and collective roles in the restoration process initiated.

Challenges and Way Ahead

- Dealing with Inequity and Exploitation, getting back lost land (which is often a lost cause), social evils like alcoholism, domestic violence, dowry, aspiration for high lifestyle and consumerism, all of which have eroded the egalitarian structure and gender balance of Adivasi communities. Tackling these internal issues will be time-consuming and herculean.
- Evolving roles as Change Makers, Barefoot Health Workers, Educators, Trainers, Land Restorers, Farmers, Seed Savers, Counselors, Mentors and Social Activists, along with all the traditional roles as wives, mothers, daughters etc must be the most inspiring and deeply enriching experience women involved in this program undergo now.
- Recreating a Sense of Community in the minds of the Adivasis to encourage them to be part of this process must be the biggest challenge the facilitators face. Co-operation and empowerment have proved to be possible in the most unlikely social settings, and farming and addressing basic survival issues are being done by a committed network of
women’s collectives. But sustaining the enthusiasm and hope can happen only by social cohesion and solidarity, the sharing of stresses and setbacks, new ideas and intellectual stimuli and more than anything by a sense of identity, pride and self-confidence. In short a shared soul-force.

The rapid assessment report presented above outlines only some of the attempts and initiates for transformation and restoration in a deforested, degraded, neglected and to an extent polluted land. Time is short, and the challenges are enormous. But by all means, this project gives the Adivasis for the very first time opportunities for emancipating themselves from despondency and disempowerment. There is already promising evidence that it can work, and many are perceiving the promise in the land and in the community. The state of Attappady and its communities are definitely at stake. Sustainable agriculture and food systems can right many wrongs, but salvation will not come from these sources alone. Ultimately, if there is to be systemic change centred on both individual transformations in thought and collective changes in action, then it is also a question of politics and power, policies and mainstream development models. Without such a change, advances seen to date will stay small scale, parochial and even temporary. Hence, this process started in Attappady will have to take a new direction towards multi-purpose and sustainable land use and agriculture, tied closely to cultures and communities, and should become increasingly mainstream. If we can get it right, we can hope to have mutually supportive, productive and inter-connected systems for ecological, social, health, food and economic security.

These are times of transition for the whole world. The old orders are dissolving. The world is hungry for a vision, a new Planetary Mythology. It is definitely slowly but surely emerging from women carrying the energy of the dynamic transformative Feminine all over the world. When we restore and reclaim the truly feminine, and honour women, we heal the fragmented and unbalanced world. When we heal the wounds we humans have inflicted on Earth, we are healing human psyche and health also. The world needs the passion, wisdom and sparks of insights that one can find in the women of Attappady, which will transform our future for the better.