

'The Tree of Life' and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among the Bhils of Chhota Udepur, Gujarat



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Rongsenzulu Jamir
MKPDF, DSPPG, IOE

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Some of the common trees found near the Bhil fields or household vicinities includes *sagun* (*Tectona grandis*), *mango* (*Mangifera indica*), *imli* (*Tamarindus indica*), *umber* (*Ficus racemose*), *peepal* (*Ficus religiosa*) and *Mahuda* (*Madhuca longifolia*). The Bhil farmers have been cultivating in the allocated plots for around three generations now, toiling for at least 7-8 hours per day in the entire week. Domestication of cows and goats are commonly found in majority households. The respondents assert every household have 6/7 buffaloes, 2/3 cows, 2/3 goats and 2-4 oxen. Some cows, nilgai, and wild boars are considered complete nuisance for the crops.

In Devaliya, a selected centre of our study, a focussed group discussion was conducted. *Karubhai Rathwa, Kujra Bhai Rathwa, Mana Bhai Rathwa and Lalo Bhai Jalia Bhai Rathwa* participated in, whole-heartedly. The cross chip-ins began, Devaliya village consists of around 800 households, with an approximate population of around 4,200 members. The village stretches to an approximate 3 km in length and 2 km in breadth. The farmers of the village sell their agricultural products in Chhota Udepur, Pavijetpur, Bodeli, and even in Vadodara. Rice and corn are the preferred crops. An acre of land produces an approximate 3 tons of produce (150 maan, 1 maan = 37.3kg). On the other hand, there is a trend of flux of labourers to Surat, Maharashtra, Kutch and Bhuj. Described below are some inferences drawn from a few villages of Chhota Udepur:

The view from the Chitra Hills, also known as *Koraj Bahar* near the Sukhi dam, provides a scenic view of dispersed *Mahuda* trees over the colourful patches of fields and the disputed debris from the stone mining. Here, every household on average have 10-15 *Mahuda* trees, conspicuously the most important tree for them.

An interview in Devhat village reveals certain imperative facets. The tree flowers in early April, and by late April until May, the seeds are collected in *dholi* (the traditional basket). Once the flowering begins, they are collected and sold for ₹25 to ₹40 per kilo. The rate is lower in

Gujarat but higher by ₹5 to ₹10 in Madhya Pradesh. The remaining flowers are kept in the house for brewing *mahua* (the local wine made from the *Mahuda* tree) mainly to be consumed and used during the festivals of Diwasa, Diwali and Holi.

In a year, they get around 20 thousand to 60 thousand or even higher. The tree is not cut down generally because the family is chiefly dependent on the tree. *Mahuda*, according to all the respondents is a better source of income because it does not require watering, fertilizers or care. 'The importance of the tree', when asked to assess on ten-point scale, majority swung between a whooping high of 7 and 8.

In Gathiya, we interviewed the wooden artisan, Basa Bhai. After taking a few images of the tools and his crafts, he showed his artefacts images stored in an old Micromax tablet that was kept on the roof for better network reception, followed by the certificates he received both internationally and nationally. He delightfully brimmed with joy, without an ounce of pride.

The adjacent room is the storage, filled with five *mosetis* (the storing jar), with lights peeping in through a square foot opening. *Mosetis* are raised a foot higher with ingenious platform supported by a stone as base for a termite-free storage. The first two of the five were filled with rice. The third had corns, and the fourth revealed the residue of dried *Mahuda* flower around (3kgs) to be utilized before the next harvest. A culmination of a year end. The fifth contained half-filled *moseti* of more corn.

There are multiple angles of significances to examine here. The first is '**equal participation**'. The collection of the flower involves all the members of the family. Men, women and children sharing equal responsibilities. The abscission of the *Mahuda* flower occurs as early as 3 Am. This non timber forest collection is also determined by the moonlight. Local knowledge associated, believes the moon hastens the cycle of the flower. Increase in the humidity also quickens the process. The season comprised a picturesque desktop screensaver. A huge arena to tap into in terms of eco-tourism.

The older trees, which are 200-250 years old, requires longer time for abscission as compared to younger ones. In older trees the flowers smell stronger; the larger the flower, the sweeter is the taste. By midnight, the matured flowers fall down. From as early as February 15th till the end of March these activities last. A process lasting for a month and half.

The tree is a huge source of **income** to the families. One tree gives at least 40 kg of flowers and seeds combined. The crafted *dobri* (basket) is useful for the collection because it gives ample scope for aeration. After drying it for fifteen days, it is stored in the jars or in large polythene

bags, however providing adequate air passage. For a medium family (5-6 members), at least 40 kg is stored to last the annual calendar. A 10 kg of the preserved flowers provide approximately 12 litres of wine. For extraction of *mahua* wine the preserved flowers (10kg) are soaked in water in an earthen pot for eight days. The water level is checked after every two days so that the flowers are immersed completely. Another distillation process which is done in the river bank could not be documented in this field visit.

Mahuda tree and its locale in the **socio-cultural** realm of the Bhils is imperative. Not only does the tree provide shade in the fields from the scorching summer heat, but it is a tree that is historically, culturally and economically deep-rooted. The seeds are utilised for extracting cooking oil and ritual oil used in worshipping the wooden posts, flowers for brewing wine, timber is used as the main beam in house construction, and flower, seeds and oil in ayurveda for treating skin diseases, cough, burning sensation in skin, nerve disorder and diarrhoea [data collected from Mandalva Cluster Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC)].

The slopes of Achalla (where *chitralipi* the earlier form of Pithora painting is found), the scenic route towards the Madhya Pradesh border, the Chitra Hills of Raypur and the uncultivated terrains that surrounds the villages are ample potential areas where the tree can be grown. The plantation will fulfil a facet of development among the Bhils of Chhota Udepur through harnessing tourism attraction especially at flowering season.

Mahuda tree alone can facilitate multiple SDGs: SDG 1 (poverty reduction), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (Enhanced economic growth), SDG 10 (reduction in inequality) and even SDG 17 (global partnership). For a tree that holds such a good prospect, what is required is an expansion of its specific market and market chain, the spur of an awareness on its hidden potential scope amongst the people and detailed mapping on prospective/existing area(s) that can coexist with the agricultural practices. All these responses will provide tremendous scope for a potential sustainable tourism.

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