

Field Worker's Diary - Part 14

Around 10 years ago, I and my colleagues spent a few days as part of a study in a Chenchu tribe's *Penta* (the Chenchu called their villages as *Pentalu*) in the Nallamala forest in Andhra Pradesh. Anywhere between 50 to 100 families lived in that small hamlet nestled deep in the middle of the forest. Collection of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) such as honey, *sarapappu*, *karakkaya*, *addaaku*, *nannari gaddalu*, etc., and selling them was the tribe's main occupation. Not all families collect the same products. Each of the families is skilled in the collection of a few select products and collect only those products. The family we stayed with in the village collected only honey and *nannari gaddalu*. *Nannari*, also known as *maredu gaddalu* or *sherbet gaddalu*, is used to make our favourite summer drink: *Nannari* sherbet. Collection of this product requires a particular skill.

Generally, a husband and wife duo from each family skilled in collecting *nannari* get up in the morning and go to the forest with a knife, spear and basket. They search for these plants and after finding them, they dig a pit of approximately two feet depth around the plant until they can find the plant's roots. Each plant has a mother root with 10 to 15 baby roots attached to it. Being careful not to hurt the mother root for sustainability, they cut the baby roots and place them in their basket. They fill the pit again with mud and come back to their houses. They wash the roots or *gaddalu* and leave them for drying in the sun and sell them afterwards. They stated that in one trip they manage to collect around 4 to 5 kilos of *nannari*, which they sell for around Rs. 55 to 60 per kg. They collect *nannari* only once a week. During the rest of the week, they are busy drying them in the sun, collecting other products and selling them.

In the few days that we spent there, we not only got a chance to learn a lot about the forest resources, their collection, and about the livelihoods dependent on them; but also got to know the living conditions and lifestyle of the tribe, their food habits and their customs. The people that I stayed with during my visit had already done enough by giving me space in their small hut, I didn't want to impose any further on their kindness; so, I tried my hand at making *jonnarottelu* for the first time in my life to assist them in their chores.

I recently heard that the area where the Chenchus collect *nannari gaddalu* is going to be dug up for Uranium. If this really does happen, then the Nallamala forest wouldn't be

inhabitable for the tribe. I don't think Chenchus can exist without their forest, and truthfully, neither can the forest exist without the tribe.

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