

#LPRD# A Field Worker's Diary [#Part 46](#) # 15 September 2020

“If a small voluntary organisation's efforts to bring awareness about the product they are collecting and its market and some training managed to increase the tribal people's income by almost eight times, I wondered how much more can they benefit if the government put in some effort with more sincerity.”

About twelve years ago, we went to the Rampachodavaram Agency area to do a study on non-timber forest products. One of the many products we studied was gum karaya (scientific name - Sterculina Urens).

It is said that there are about 12 species of Gum Karaya in our country. Since the Rampachodavaram agency area was abundant with these trees, gum karaya was one of the many non-timber forest products collected by the tribals there. The gum is edible and can be eaten by any of us. The gum has many benefits and is mainly used in the food industry and the pharma industry. It is used in almost twenty five types of industries such as pharmacy, Ice creams, sweets, biscuits, cosmetics.

Our study team's work was to study the activities that need to be done from the time a tribal collects the gum karaya to the time it is sold in the market, how its value increases, what sort of issues and opportunities exist from collection to marketing, etc.

The best time for gum collection is between April and June and again between October and January. All the gum trees in the forest there were distributed among the people who collected it. One should collect gum only from the trees allocated to them. Gum collection is a two-day affair. On the first day, the collector goes to the forest and makes a crescent-shaped incision on their tree with a scythe and returns. After 2-3 days, they have to carefully cut the gum that has trickled from the earlier incision and make a new incision at a new place and come back. If one collects about 5 kilos of gum from a trip, after drying it, they get around 2 to 3 kilos of gum. As they generally make two trips a week, therefore, they collect around 5 to 6 kilos of gum in one week.

The gum collected in this way is brought and sold at the Addatheegala shandy at the end of the week. The tribal there stated that earlier they used to sell their gum to the middlemen in the shandy and took whatever money they gave in return. But nowadays they only sell their produce to the government-run Girijan Cooperative Corporation. They

segregate the collected gum into three grades based on quality and then sell it. Kovel Foundation, a voluntary organisation for whom we were conducting the study, is based out of Vizag and works for development of tribes through the collection of gum karaya. Before the organisation started working with the tribals, most of trees had been damaged by the people due to lack of knowledge about scientific methods of collecting gum. The first thing the organisation did was to give training to come collectors.

They need to be very careful to collect good gum without damaging the trees. Doing things like, making a crescent-shaped cut on the tree, cutting at less than 90 cm of height, not using the scythe for any other purpose, cleaning the tree trunk before making the incision, collecting the gum in a clean sieve-like basket, cleaning the place meant for drying the gum, etc., will ensure the quality of the gum and prevent damage to the trees. The price of first grade quality gum is also high. At that time, it was Rs. 170 per kg.

Just due to lack of awareness about little things, not having someone to teach them, and their gum being of low quality, they always used to sell the collected gum for low prices. In addition to Kovel Foundation staff going and meeting everyone in that remote agency area and giving them special training, the support of Girijan Cooperative Corporation, which was started by the government to provide the facility of marketing tribal products, has brought in lot of change in the tribals lives. They stated that at one time they used to sell gum at Rs. 20 to 30, they didn't do any grading, they even used to exchange 2 to 3 kilos of gum for a packet of local liquor at the liquor shop as they didn't know the value of the gum.

If a small voluntary organisation's efforts to bring awareness about the product they are collecting and its market and some training managed to increase the tribal people's income by almost eight times, I wondered how much more can they benefit if the government put in some effort with more sincerity. The Girijan Cooperative Corporation set up by the government to market those products has some leeway. Yet, the influence of middlemen still seemed to be strong.

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