

Health and Hope in the Nilgiri Hills, India

By Lydia Monds

The India I had always envisaged was bustling and overcrowded, with scorching heat accentuating pungent smells of open sewerage and spices. However, India is a vast and diverse country and when I travelled there in late June for the annual evaluation of a Bishops' Appeal funded programme, I found myself experiencing quite a different aspect to it than the one captured in books I had read.

I travelled to the cooler heights of the Nilgiri Hills in Southern India and moved throughout the region visiting projects aimed at farmers, rural and remote communities and small tribal groups.

A local NGO, the Earth Trust, provides holistic support through organic farming, health programmes and school eco-clubs. Bishops' Appeal has been supporting this project since 2008.

HAMLET IN THE HILLS

The first village I visited was a small hamlet high in the hills where people warned us of staying beyond 4pm as the elephants move around in the evenings in search of water and jack fruits and can be aggressive.

Here, two Earth Trust Health Worker trainers, Meera and Mala, had trained women from villages in the district in basic herbal remedies for ailments such as joint pain, stomach upset, skin rashes and headaches.

The oils and powders are made from one or two herbs and are producing amazing results in the lives of the communities there.

Addressing an ailment usually means taking time off casual labour to travel 15km to a medical centre or 40 km to a hospital. This means forfeiting the small earnings that provide food for that day.

Understandably, people then ignore small complaints until the problem is completely exacerbated. Certainly, with so many people working up and down the hills on the tea estates, joint pain and skin and stomach problems as well as eye and respiratory complaints from contact with the pesticides are common occurrences.

The Health Worker of this particular hamlet, Rammiammal, visits ten surrounding hamlets up to 5km away at least once a week. She is given a small remittance for her expenses and some of her patients came to tell me of the impact of the oils on their wellbeing.

Rammiammal was proud of her contribution to her community and her growing knowledge of how to help others. She travels once a month to a sterile medicinal centre with a herbal nursery and prepares her oils with other Health Workers. The remedies are given out for free to those who need it.

An elderly man with an extensive skin rash had been unsuccessful in clearing it with prescribed medicine. By applying coconut oil mixed with rue plant extract it had cleared within a week and Rammiammal was following up with basic hygiene training to prevent further fungal infections.

KOTAS TRIBE

Later, I visited a session where Health Workers were being trained from the Kotas Tribe. 27 women congregated to learn basic anatomy, health, hygiene and herbal remedies. They wore white sheets as was their traditional dress and served me wheat dough and roasted amaranthus seeds with honey to eat.

It was explained that traditional foods were high in nutrients but when scavenging for root plants in the forest was looked down upon as uncivilised, many had switched to low grade rice, and malnutrition and diabetes had soared.

Part of this programme was reintroducing people to practices that had kept previous generations strong and healthy.

I asked participants what was the most useful information they had learnt on the course to date. One woman cited learning different parts of the body as a huge 'eye opener' as now she could identify what was ailing her when she felt unwell. Another said that through what she had learnt she had been able to provide relief to a bed-ridden neighbour suffering from rheumatism through some simple massage.

Revarthi spoke of relief from migraines and Valarmathi from back pain and acid reflux. Others spoke of being able to address prolonged bouts of sleeplessness with basic breathing techniques or improved hygiene that had already noticeably reduced illness among their children.

All of them had started growing herbs from cuttings received at class and were eager to go on to the next phase of making the various oils and powders.

ORGANIC FARMING

I visited several nurseries where organic farming training takes place. Managing Director Sivakumar explained that organic farming is not only about a change in practices, it is about a change in mind-set. The results are not only enriched soil and produce, but also improved health for the farmer and increased income and output.

For example, the grass grown on the vertical slope of terraced hills binds the soil and adds needed nutrients but can also be sold as cattle fodder. Similarly, the simple practice of growing the Azolla plant in water ponds and giving a handful of it to a cow can increase milk production by 10-15%.

As we stood in the Thambatty nursery, the generators from surrounding farms whirred as neighbouring fields continued to spray pesticides. Despite no use of sprays, the nursery vegetables thrived using simple rotation techniques and natural composts and pest repellents and surrounding farms were curious as to how this could be.

Initially the Earth Trust gauged the success of this initiative based on the number of farmers who converted to producing wholly organic produce and they were disheartened by the seemingly low numbers. However, when they began to assess success based on the numbers of people who reduced pesticides by 50-80% and who incorporated new techniques, composts, cattle feed, crop diversification and rotation into their practices, they realised they were having a major impact on livelihoods in the Nilgiri Hills.

SCHOOLS

Finally, I visited schools where children were learning about the environment, natural forests, composts, vegetable and herb growing. Their knowledge of the subject was astounding and the clubs were catered to their particular contexts.

For example, one school was situated right on a lake and dam. The children collected lilies from the lake and used them in the making of vermi-compost, a nutrient-dense compost made from worm secretion. They sold the compost to local tea estates and used the profits to buy more school resources and to hold sports days.

At another school where all the children came from homes below the poverty line, the students grew vegetables in large secured pens to keep the monkeys out and in a home-made plastic bottle greenhouse as the climate wasn't warm enough for some of the produce.

The vegetables were then used to bulk up the small meal provided each day at the school, often the only meal the children received in the day.

SUSTAINABLE

I left feeling uplifted by the changes in people's practices, statuses, health and well-being because of the work of the Earth Trust.

The growing produce from the nurseries is creating a scenario whereby the work is becoming more and more sustainable and the impact it is having throughout the region is becoming more and more noticeable.

The passion and specialisation exuded by the teachers and practitioners of the health, farming and schools programmes is slowly being imparted to those around them and the results speak for themselves.

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